A THRILLING PUBLICATION

# MASKED RIDER WESTERN

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JUNE

## MAD MAN OF MOONSTONE

*A Wayne Morgan Novel by* **HASCAL GILES**

JOE ARCHIBALD • ALLAN K. ECHOLS
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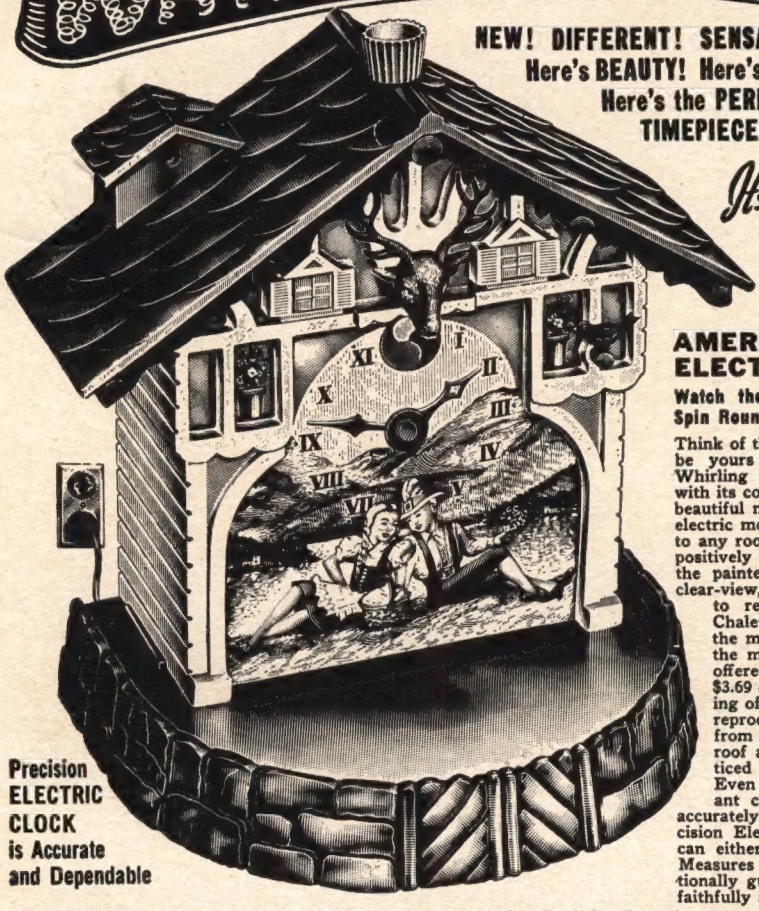

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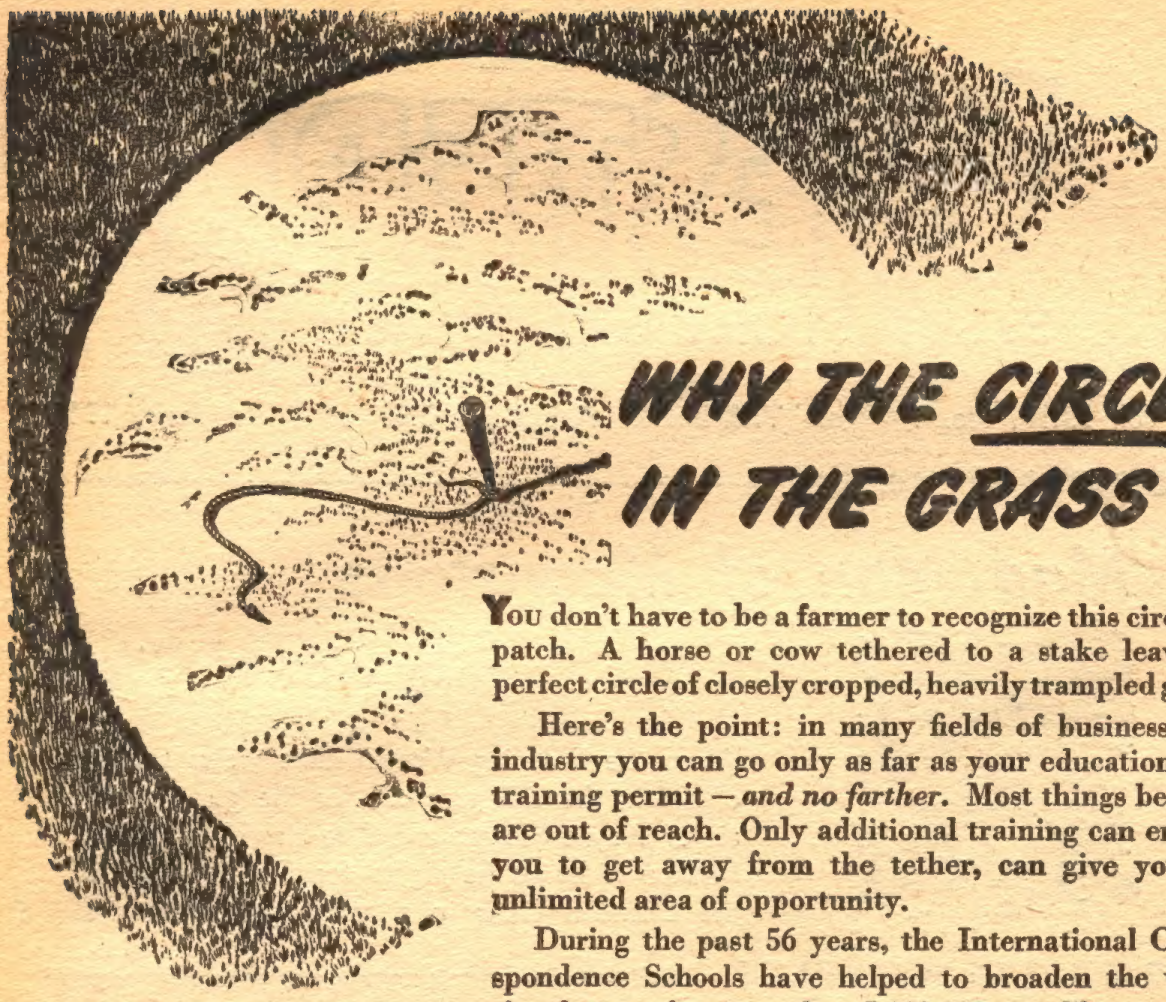

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### *Mad Man of Moonstone*

*by Hascal Giles*

When the Weeping Woman mine yields the ore of death, the call goes out for the gun and fist aid of Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk! Follow the Masked Rider as he fights for Cap Maxwell of the Diamond Cross in a range war of survival 9


## COMPLETE NOVELET


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GREETINGS, waddies, uncoil your twine, snare a cayuse and we will be off on another trail jaunt, and as we ride along the trails of the Western pioneer we will indulge in a little trail talk. We will ride over the same trails that were traversed by those old pioneers who in reality gave us the West. Of course, it was there all the time, but they are the men who revamped it, or at least changed it so that we of later generations can live in it and enjoy peace and prosperity. We owe a lot to those old pioneers!

We don't want to be interpreted as meaning that every one of those who went West in the early days went there just to prepare the country so that we could live in it and enjoy it as we do today. The main motive of about ninety percent of those who traveled westward in the early days was to build homes for themselves and their families.

Many of them were fortune hunters, and many both fortune hunters and adventurers, men who loved excitement—and they knew that there was plenty of excitement in that wild country. It was, perhaps, the love of adventure that caused so many to travel those early trails—not merely the fortunes they expected to wrest from the raw, wild country.

### They Followed the Frontier

Did you ever, when a kid, move to a new neighborhood, or to a different town or state? Remember what an adventure it was? People have always been drawn to new experiences, new localities. That's why adventurers always followed the Frontier, and as the Frontier moved they moved with it.

A new town or a new country has always seemed to present unusual opportunities. That is why thousands of people from many different states lined up along the Border of Oklahoma on April 22nd, 1889, to make the race for land in the opening of the Cherokee Strip. Some of them left good homes or farms to risk their lives in that mad rush for land, because here was new land, free land if one could beat the other fellow to it, and here was plenty of adventure!

There was a mad rush across the wilderness of the West to California in '49 when gold was discovered there, and ten years later it was the same to Denver when the word went forth that there was gold in the hills of Colorado.

Gold was the magic word that laid the foundation for the city of Denver, and there was a grand stampede from the East. Four trails led to the Pike's Peak country. The northern one followed the South Platte, and the southern the old Santa Fe route. Between these were the Smoky Hill River road and the one along the Republican.

### A Great Migration

The stage from Leavenworth, Kansas, which was what might be termed the western edge of civilization, took the latter route. Albert D. Richardson, a journalist who made the trip, wrote that along the route the stage passed ten thousand travelers on the way. This was probably very much exaggerated, but it is true that there was a great migration westward in those days. Richardson said that the dusty road was dotted with white covered wagons. At night hundreds of campfires flung up their smoke.

One could have traced the trail by the cook stoves, picks, shovels, bedsteads and other articles tossed away to lighten the load, by broken-down wagons, by the skeletons of worn-out horses and oxen, by the graves along the route, graves of men who never reached the Promised Land.

They came in all manner of conveyances, covered wagons, oxcarts, broughams, some even pushed carts, and some walked with a pack upon their backs. Nothing like this had been seen since the great California gold rush ten years earlier.

Just try to picture a modern man having enough patience to travel at an oxcart pace a thousand or fifteen hundred miles or even more! Today even our fastest trains are too slow for many of us, and in making such a trip we prefer to fly. We like to eat dinner in New York and are impatient if we are not as far west as Denver by breakfast time the next morning.

Sometimes I wonder how we would measure up to the old pioneer in patience, in our willingness to risk our lives for what we think is right.

We can't say that those of the pioneers who were gold-seekers were not eager to get to their destination swiftly, for that was supposed to be the end of their rainbow, that was where they would find gold—and the eagerness of many proved their downfall. That was one of the reasons why there were skeletons of worn-out horses and oxen, and that was the reason for many of the graves of human beings along the route.

### Dangerous Trails

Men argued and fought over short cuts. They sometimes replaced their guides or scouts because these men advised going a longer route, a safer route, against the wishes of some to take a short cut. Sometimes their impatience made them dash headlong into hostile Indian-infested country, because they refused to wait while scouts went ahead far enough to explore or find out if there were hostile Indians ahead.

When they reached Denver, many were disappointed. It must have seemed a dreary spot for the stage terminal, or for the end of the line for the covered wagons. It was a town of shacks. There were no women except the squaws of the Arapahoes and the women who came with the pioneers. The squaws hovered on the edge of town in tee-

*(Continued on page 105)*


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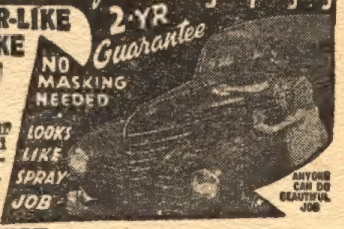


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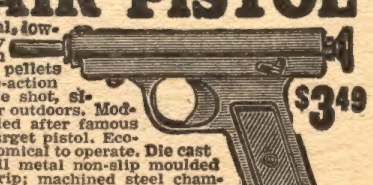

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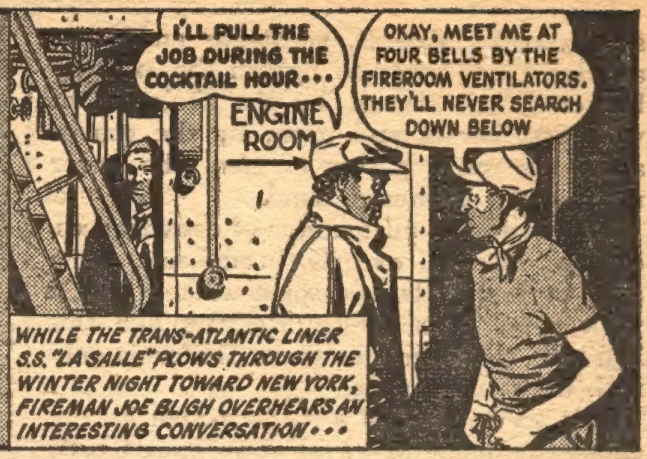
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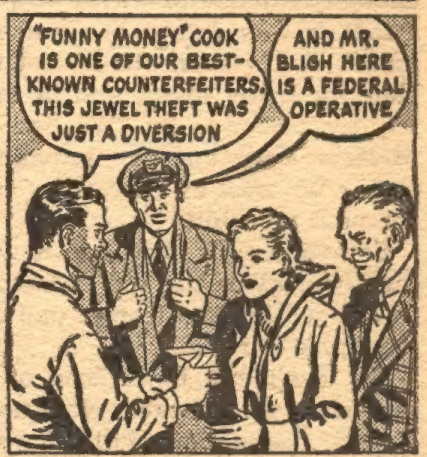
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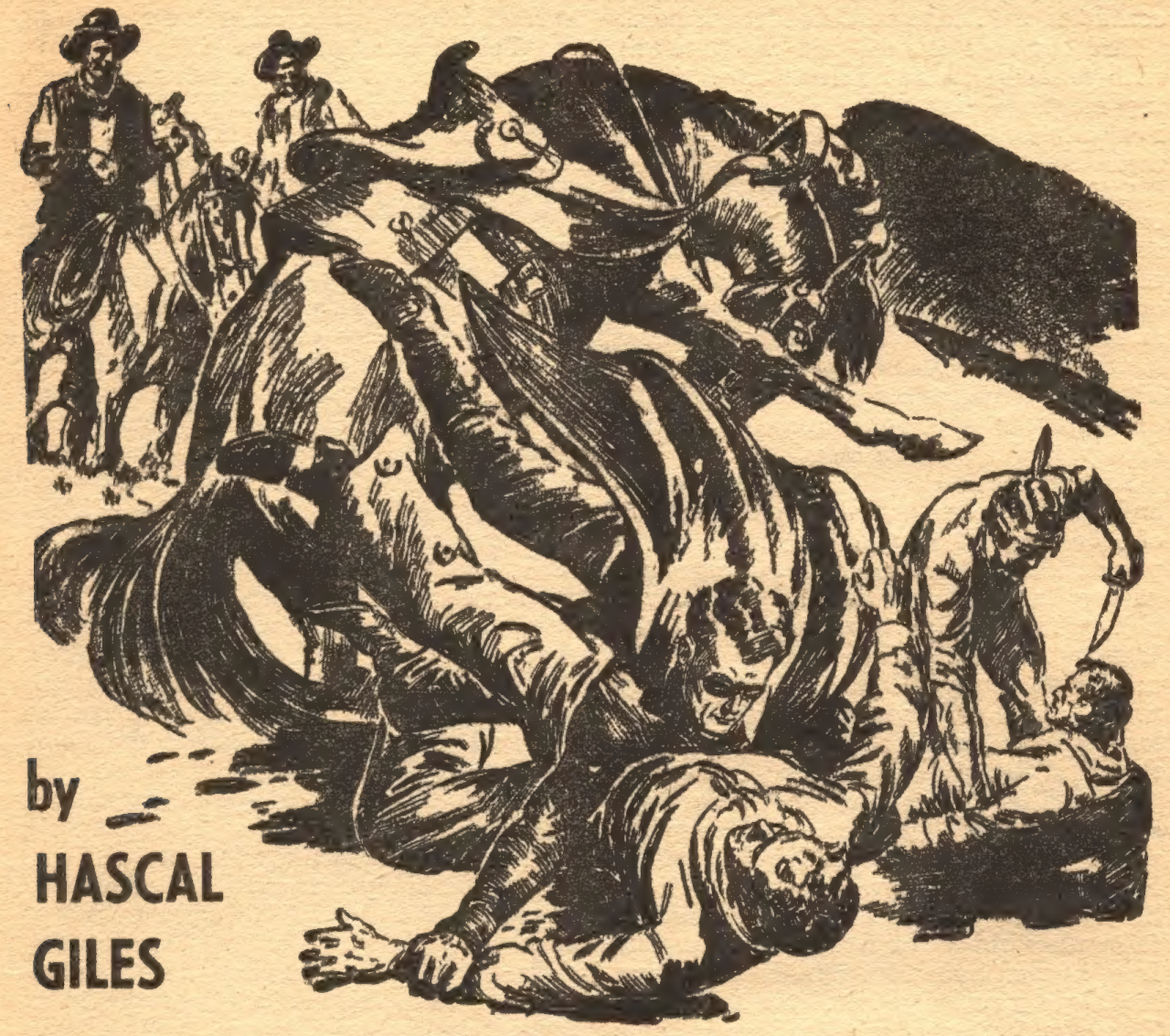


by HASCAL GILES

# Mad Man of Moonstone

## A WAYNE MORGAN NOVEL

### CHAPTER I

*Restless Cattle*

THE Diamond Cross roundup camp was silent while the storm built up in the hills. Thunder rumbled and roared among the craggy granite ridges in the distance. Intermittent flashes of lightning struck fantastic reflections from the cores of various minerals in the rocks. Still far away, the storm seemed to be rolling on clanging wheels toward the camp, the sound of its fury striking first in the great irregular crater of Moonstone Valley and then slipping through the mouth of the little dog-leg hollow that

# Wayne Morgan Sides Old Cap Maxwell of the

contained the Diamond Cross Ranch herd.

The cowboys around the campfire sat with tense backs and solemn faces, staring morosely into the flickering flames. Fear and foreboding seemed to hover over their thoughts.

Old Cap Maxwell, the big rawboned owner of the Diamond Cross Ranch, was aware of their silence and preoccupation, and he tried to hide the uneasiness in his own weathered face when the men lifted an occasional glance toward him. He knew it was not the gathering storm that had killed the usual round of talk at tonight's campfire. It was something far more deadly, and it worried him.

After his last crew had quit, a month had been required to collect a new string of riders, and Maxwell had taken every precaution to keep them until he could gather enough cattle to pay the stockholders who had invested money in the Weeping Woman Mine which he had helped to finance. He had personally promised each investor that he would not lose by trusting him. The men had done that, and the mine had failed.

Even after four years, those men were still looking to Cap Maxwell to keep his word. Proud of this trust, the old rancher had made regular payments to the stockholders each year. But this year he would fail unless the herd was marketed. Before, he had had help, but the duty was his alone now. Grady Sloan and Thad Tate, the two men who had shared his burden, were dead. They had died less than two miles from the hollow in which Maxwell was camped. Sloan and Tate had been partners in the mining venture, and both were as honest and truthful as Cap Maxwell. Their killer still ran free.

It was this that put the tension in Maxwell's riders tonight. Most of the men were new to this range, picked up one at a time by Whit Berry, the Diamond Cross foreman, as they drifted into the little cowtown of Cactus at the lower end of the valley. Neither Maxwell nor Berry had told the cowboys of the circumstances which had caused other riders to draw their time at the Diamond Cross and ride away, but every man had eventually learned the story from other sources. Now they believed that the same killer who had waylayed two of Cap Maxwell's partners would eventually get Maxwell, too. It looked like part of a plan, and riding for a man who was marked for death was enough to make them uneasy.

"What's that?"

SKINNY, sandy-haired Jack Long leaped suddenly to his feet as some sound came to his ear through the stillness left by a dying thunderclap. He stood there a moment peering anxiously into the inky gloom which storm clouds had brought to Moonstone Valley.

Gray-haired Cap Maxwell stilled his first chill of surprise, and raised mild blue eyes toward the dark bulk two hundred yards below. Over the gentle waving of dark dried sage and crisp clumps of mesquite, he could see the outline of the herd. The cattle were bedded east of Nugget Creek, the faithful little stream that fed lush grass and made the hollow green in spots where Nature had swept the floor clean of rocks.

Hobe Venter, one of the night riders, moved across Maxwell's line of vision. The rancher recognized the silhouette of Venter's thick, burly frame and the slouching way in which he sat his saddle. Stacy Lipps, the other man on duty, was not in sight. By the wavering flare of a lightning flash he saw Venter's arm moving in a ragged circle above his head.

"Sit down, Long." Cap Maxwell forced his voice to be strong and calm as he spoke to the skinny cowboy who still stared into the darkness. "What yuh heard was the whistle of Hobe Venter's lariat. The cattle must be restless, for I see Venter's swingin' his rope over 'em to keep 'em bunched."

"Bad sign," Whit Berry said tonelessly from Maxwell's right. The Diamond Cross foreman stood up and raised his steel gray eyes toward the rough ridge which boxed in the hollow from the north. Lightning was dancing on the horizon, jumping from peak to peak like impish devils.

"What do yuh mean, Whit?" Maxwell asked.

# Diamond Cross In a Range War for Survival

The tall foreman pulled his hands close to the two pearl-handled Colts that rode low on his lean thighs, and nodded in the direction of the herd which was bedded between the camp and the mouth of the hollow.

"The cows were spooked before the thunder started, Cap. When a herd starts millin' for no reason a-tall, there's trouble on the air. We don't have to hold our tongues no more; the boys here all know that out of the four men who organized the Nugget Creek Minin' Company, there ain't but two left. We're less than two miles from the Weepin' Woman Mine, Cap, where Grady Sloan and Thad Tate got salivated. Nobody's goin' to waste time killin' Shan Loring, so that leaves mostly just you that the killer wants."

Cap Maxwell sighed wearily as the thoughts that had been in his own mind were voiced aloud by Whit Berry. He tried to keep his eyes away from the strained faces of the riders across the fire from him.

"Where you goin', Whit?" Maxwell asked quietly as the foreman turned and walked away from the fire. Tenseness was beginning to eat at the rancher's nerves now, and he wanted Whit Berry where he could reach him. If trouble should come, the young foreman was the only man Maxwell could count on for help. The other riders were new and untried, but Whit Berry would stand and fight. In addition to his loyalty, the young foreman had reason to hate the man who had killed Maxwell's partners as much as the rancher did.

WAYNE MORGAN

Berry turned and looked back at the rancher. His clean-cut brown face was tired and haggard, and weariness showed in the depths of his gray eyes.

"Me, I don't like nervous cattle," he answered slowly. "I'm goin' down to the herd and check with Venter and Stacy Lipps. If things look right, I'll probably ride through the hollow and take a pasear around this end of Moonstone Valley. There's a lot of places I ain't been yet; so

many canyons and caves and arroyos down there that I'll probably never get around to all of 'em."

Cap Maxwell shook his head sadly as he met the cowboy's steady eyes. "You was in the saddle all night last night and all day to today, Whit. You're killin' yourself. Why don't you give it up?"

For a moment, Whit Berry did not reply, and then he said: "You was married once, Cap, and I know yuh loved yore wife. Would you give up?"

Maxwell shook his head slowly. "No, Whit. But you need rest."

IN THE dense darkness that settled again on the heels of each lightning flash, Whit Berry was invisible the moment he stepped away from the fire and toward his hobbled horse a short distance beyond. But Cap Maxwell stared at the spot where Berry disappeared, his sympathy for the youngster taking his mind from his own worries.

The search on which Whit Berry was again about to start had been a long and heart-breaking one. It had started three months ago, the day after Grady Sloan had been killed. Sloan's daughter, Velma, was to have been married the next day. Whit Berry was to be the bridegroom. But the wedding had never been performed because Velma Sloan disappeared on the same day her father died.

Cap Maxwell's mind traveled back to the last time he had seen her. She had been a tragic figure riding into Cactus on her grulla cowpony with the limp body of her father across the saddle in front of her. Whit Berry and Cap Maxwell had been in town to buy supplies and they had gone to the undertaker's office with her to make arrangements for Grady Sloan's burial.

Afterward, Whit Berry had wanted to accompany the girl home when she rode out toward the little G Bar S Ranch in the foothills, but Cap Maxwell had held him back. Velma had been very brave throughout the ordeal, and Maxwell had known the emotion he saw veiled in her hazel eyes was being held in leash until she was alone.

For that reason he had advised Whit to stay behind, but he had always regretted his interference. Velma Sloan had not been seen again. and her fate was still a mystery. Since then Whit Berry's mind had known no rest. The young foreman had driven himself almost to the point of exhaustion in a fruitless search for a clue to her disappearance.

A sudden ear-splitting crash of thunder jerked Maxwell's thoughts back to the present, and he swung a swift glance toward the cattle to see if they were still in place. As his eyes made the turn, the old rancher leaped to his feet with cold sweat growing immediately on his leathery brow. For the space of a few seconds he had forgotten that his own life was hounded by an ever-present menace, and in that brief interval that long-expected blow against the Diamond Cross had come! It came so swiftly, and in such an unexpected way, that Maxwell's tongue could not find words at first.

Finally, he yelled: "Whit, look! Look over there!"

A chorus of yells drowned the rancher's voice, for all of the men saw the light at once. One moment the narrow pocket of the granite-rimmed valley in which the herd was camped was as black as pitch. The next instant, a brilliant red flare broke through the darkness on Cap Maxwell's left, appearing first against the blue-white rocks of the steep ridge behind them.

Red tongues of flame leaped skyward like bloody lances, competing with the flashing lightning in their brilliance. The scarlet streak moved on, racing swiftly toward the mouth of the hollow, firing brush and sage in a wavering red line as it flew past the herd.

Almost at the same instant a similar flare appeared to the right, flitting like a grounded comet through the tender grass and brush which grew thicker there because of the creek. While the startled cowboys gaped in awe, two gleaming streaks of fire sprang to life, stretching from the rocks behind the camp to the mouth of the hollow. A wall of flame now crackled hungrily on each side of the camp and the herd. Toward the south, the fire lines curved like prongs and pressed rapidly together, blocking any escape from the hollow into Moonstone Valley.

"We're trapped!" a cowboy yelled in horror. "Fire on both sides of us. It'll get us all—the cattle, too!"

Wayne Morgan staggered and tried to catch his balance as Hobe Venter reached for his throat (CHAP. IX)

## CHAPTER II

### *Robin Hood Rider*

FOR a full minute after he sounded the alarm, Cap Maxwell was too dumfounded to move. He threw a bony forearm above his squinted eyes as it to shut the awesome scene from his vision. At first the fire had seemed to come from nowhere, a devastating force of the supernatural that had suddenly transferred Hell to this jutting finger of Moonstone Valley.

Strangely, the confusion of the others snapped Cap Maxwell to his senses. He decided there was nothing uncanny about the brush fire that had suddenly doomed his men and his cattle. In the concealing shadows of the northern ridge, two unknown horsemen had waited and watched for the right moment. They had soaked a heavy torch with some inflammable substance, fastened it to their saddles with a draw chain, and then dragged it through the summer-parched brush of Moonstone Valley. By now the horsemen had discarded their torches, and had fled through the defile to the interminable maze of the main part of the valley.

Far below, now lighted grotesquely by fire-thrown shadows at one moment and cavorting lightning the next, the Diamond Cross herd bellowed in fright. Oddly, there was no sound from the two night riders; but around Cap Maxwell other voices chorused in bewilderment and fear.

The rancher had to shout twice to make himself heard above the increasing roar of thunder.

"Get yore horses, men," he yelled hoarsely. "This is a straight lane from the bed grounds, and them cattle will stampede before long. They won't run to the fire, so they'll come this way. Yuh don't want to be afoot when that happens!"

As his voice took hold of them, the men made a dive toward their hobbled mounts. But they did not have to go the full distance. Maxwell had thought it odd that Whit Berry had not answered his call, and now he saw the reason. Whit Berry came out of the darkness with his hands full of dangling reins. At the first announcement of the brush fire, the tall foreman had kept his head and worked swiftly. He had the horses ready, saddles draped loosely across their backs.

"Tighten the cinches and check yore bridles," he said sternly as some of the noise subsided. "It's a hurry-up job."

He shifted his eyes to the gaunt face of Cap Maxwell. "What do yuh say, Cap? It looks like every man for himself."

Maxwell grabbed his own horse and worked skillfully on the harness. "I got more cattle down there than I've had in one spot in two years. I need 'em, Whit. Milo Trapp is pressin' me for more money on his gold mine stock, and besides I've got my own debts. I've let 'em go while I tried to pay back what Grady, Thad and me promised we would."

"Forget about that miserly Milo Trapp and think of yore life," Whit Berry snapped. "He's the only one that ever gripes about what he lost, anyway. It ain't fair, Cap. Why don't somebody jump on Shan Loring? He's the gent that said there was a bold vein there to start with."

The rancher whirled his horse around and frowned at the younger man. "Quit talkin' nonsense, Whit. Shan Loring is so loco he thinks he's paid off more than I have. Think of them cows. With as many men as we got, we can push 'em through the thinnest line of the fire to the land that's already burned. Enough runnin' hoofs will smother out a path for us to follow and—"

A flurry of motion drowned out the rancher's voice. The four cowboys had grown tired of waiting for orders. They were gone like a whirlwind, dashing madly toward the rocky ridge before the two roaring fires united and closed the last lane of escape.

"It's hopeless, Cap," Whit Berry said hurriedly. "There go yore men!"

Moving with surprising speed, Maxwell dragged his old Peacemaker Colt from the scarred holster on his hip and started to fire a warning shot over the fleeting riders. Then he lowered the gun and shook his head in resignation.

"They're gone, all right. My reputation and my ranch is probably gone with 'em. But we'll save our own skins, Whit. Ride for the ridge and pray that them cattle don't start movin' until we get a head start. We'll have to pick our trail, and they won't take time!"

GANGLING Whit Berry nodded grimly, and started to roll his spurs along his pony's flanks. Then abruptly he slacked off on the reins, looked meaningly across at the gaunt, gray-haired man beside him. The ridge was cut off from view now by a shimmering red blanket that hung before it. A crooked line of dead cedars had given the fire new vigor and the two sections had come together.

While they sat stunned by the realization that they were completely surrounded by the inferno, the unmistakeable rumble of hoofs was clear above the crackle of the growing fire and the murmuring thunder of the heavens. The cattle were already moving! There was scorching fire five hundred yards ahead of them, and half a thousand head of charging, maddened, sharp-horned cattle running in blind terror behind them!

"Whoever's after the bosses of the Nugget Creek Minin' Company won't have nobody to worry about after this, I reckon," Cap Maxwell said tightly. "Look like we're gon—"

Cap Maxwell broke off and blinked in amazement at the raging fire ahead of him. At first he thought hysteria had confused his senses and that his eyes were deceiving him. The thought of supernatural things almost found its way into his mind again, for silhouetted against that menacing red wall, were the two strangest horsemen he had ever seen!

In an instant he realized that what he saw was true, for the nearness of the figures was proof that they had had time to enter the hollow before the fire blocked the ridge from sight. A giant black stallion caught his attention first—a magnificent high-stepping horse with an ebony hide that glistened like molten metal in the firelight. But, as strange as the great stallion appeared at that moment, the rider was even more startling to gaze upon.

Leaning low on the stallion's back was a tall, black-clad figure whose ease in the rocking saddle made him seem a part of his speeding mount. Both horse and rider moved with such grace that they appeared to sail along the earth as if driven by a powerful wind. The flowing cape which was slung from the black-clad horseman's shoulders made the illusion even more deceiving.

As the rider came closer, Cap Maxwell's wondering eyes took in the full picture and he was grateful that it was not an apparition. A black mask shielded the eyes and upper part of the man's hard, brown face and a black sombrero was pulled low on his forehead. The flames behind him struck jagged reflections from the two worn Colts that were snugged low on the man's lithe thighs.

"Saints alive!" Maxwell cried excitedly. "It—it's the Masked Rider, Whit!" He did not know why the fear in his body surrendered to sudden elation, but the many tales that he had heard of this daring, mysterious benefactor of troubled men give him new hope for deliverance.

Whit Berry whirled around, his face flushed with joy as he studied the two horsemen. A few paces behind the Masked Rider was a stocky, copper-skinned Indian. He was of the Yaqui tribe, a muscular, graceful man who clung to the back of his sturdy gray pony with the skill and tenacity of his savage forefathers.

Aside from the single eagle feather that was held close to his broad forehead by the scarlet bandeau which bound his long raven-black hair, there was little of the savage in this man. He was dressed in white drill pants and a blue cavalry shirt. A scarlet sash served as a belt around his tapering waist, not quite concealing the hilt of a bone-handled hunting knife.

"The Masked Rider and his Indian pard Blue Hawk!" the foreman breathed. "I've heard of 'em, but never believed they was real people till now!"

The many tales of daring and gunspeed that were whispered in brawling trail towns and around lonely campfires made the reality of the Masked Rider difficult to comprehend, indeed. He had become a legend in every hamlet of the far-flung West, his name striking fear into the hearts of the lawless and reviving good memories for those unfortunate and persecuted people whom he had helped.

THOUGH he was the champion of the common man, a relentless foe of outlawery and oppression, the Masked Rider was not always mentioned in words of praise. Through the machinations of wily outlaws and dishonest lawmen, he was listed among the ranks of "wanted" men. A fabulous bounty awaited the man who

captured or killed the famed Robin Hood of the danger trails. Because of this, the black domino mask was never removed in the presence of anyone except the trusted Yaqui. Only Blue Hawk knew that the daring black-clad horseman often removed his robe and mask and walked abroad in the guise of a wandering soft-spoken cowboy who was known as Wayne Morgan.

Before Cap Maxwell could speak again, the great black stallion had skidded to a halt a few feet in front of the rancher and his foreman. Blue Hawk, the Yaqui Indian, reined in beside the stallion, his coppery hands closing immediately on the stock of the Winchester rifle in his saddle boot. He sat stoically that way while the Masked Rider quieted the stallion, his black eyes alert as he waited to learn if these men would try to collect the reward on the black-clad man's head.

Keen blue eyes sparkled through the slits in the satin mask as the Robin Hood outlaw faced Cap Maxwell and Whit Berry. He glanced once in the direction of the herd, saw the white faces of terrified steers swinging into view.

"What are we waitin' for?" he asked, his voice deep and vibrant. "Let's stop them cattle!"

Cap Maxwell was quickly aware of the power in that husky voice, and he knew that for a time he was no longer in command of his own outfit. The Masked Rider had assumed immediate authority, but the rancher was still dubious of tht outcome.

Maxwell's eyes made a rapid sweep of the land, and horror again laid its grip on him. Flames were racing in madly from the east; below him the mass of horned heads had become a white blob in the night, and behind them were the crushing, maddened bodies of stampeding cattle!

"We can't do that!" Maxwell yelled above the clattering din. "You can't chase cows into fire, and they're already on us!"

With an impatient gesture, the Masked Rider flung the flowing black cape away from his arms. In the same movement, his gloved hands blurred with speed, the two black Colts appeared miraculously in his clutching fists, strong thumbs pulling the hammers back.

"Keep yore head, man!" the robed horseman snapped. "You ain't even remembered that there's a creek a little to the West, and that one line of the fire is on the far bank. The men that set this inferno forgot that, too, and the fire can't burn through that water over there. We'll drive the cattle into the creek, string 'em out up and down the length of it. They'll stay there!"

Whit Berry spoke for the first time, his voice thin with controlled fear. "I'd as soon try to get through there by myself. They're almost here! How we goin' to stop them."

"Hot lead will stop anything on foot," the Masked Rider cut in sharply, explaining the drawn Colts. "You'll never outrun 'em. Which would you rather do, lose thirty-forty steers or the whole herd? Kill 'em as they come at you! That's better than lettin' them burn to death and it's your life against a cow. Pile up a few here, and the others may turn!"

There was no time left for argument. A bawling, red-eyed steer burst into the ring of light cast by the smouldering fire. It was running hard, far ahead of the others, and appeared with such abruptness that it caught the old rancher off-guard as it headed straight for Maxwell's horse. The Masked Rider's worn six-gun spat lead and flame. The terrified animal took one more step, then dropped to a painless death within five feet of Cap Maxwell's mount.

The shot was enough to convince Cap Maxwell and Whit Berry of the Masked Rider's wisdom and skill. They had camped within sight of Nugget Creek and had forgotten its safety in the excitement and confusion of the fire. But the famed Robin Hood outlaw was accustomed to respecting Nature as his silent partner in critical moments, and he had ridden to their rescue with the plan already in mind.

HASTILY the gaunt rancher and the tall foreman rode up to flank the robed horseman now, their guns drawn as they faced the thundering herd. The earth beneath them trembled and shook as the running cattle bore down on them. As if vexed by the competition below, the heavens above suddenly growled anew and the rain which had been threatening for hours broke loose. It came just as the main body of cattle burst into view, and

the sizzle of drying water could be heard faintly as it fell into the burning valley.

"Here they come!" Whit Berry cried hoarsely, but there was no answer to his announcement. Only the roar of guns and the scream of lead as each man fired into the raging mass of live bodies.

Every man stayed in the saddle, their guns rattling in spasmodic explosions. The Masked Rider took his stance a few feet in front of the others, Maxwell and Berry on either side of him and Blue Hawk farther away on his left. Midnight, the Robin Hood rider's battle-wise stallion, stood gallantly still, not moving a muscle that would spoil his master's aim. Both black Colts were gripped in the Masked Rider's hands, hammering out a duet of death as the steers kept coming.

There were ten or fifteen animals in that first crushing wave. The Masked Rider picked off the first four with as many fast-thrown shots, watching them fall and flounder in the growing mud, tripping up the others. The guns of Maxwell and Berry were a steady rattle beside him, and Blue Hawk levered and fired his rifle with studied care, seldom missing a shot.

Only one of the beasts got through. It came leaping and jumping over the pile of dead bodies, seeing nothing, feeling nothing but the desire to run as it sailed through the air toward the Masked Rider's horse. Cap Maxwell screamed a warning and snapped off a shot, missing. Blue Hawk swung around with his rifle, his usually impassive face showing alarm as he realized there was not time for a shot. None of them could have saved the Robin Hood outlaw from a deadly spill then, and he could not drop his guns to jerk the reins quick enough. But Midnight needed no command. The gleaming black horse suddenly reared high in the air, swung around in mid-air while the masked man held on with his knees. The steer zoomed under the uplifted hoofs, running on into the rocks and bellowing with fear.

BLUE HAWK

"Reload!" the masked man shouted as they had a brief respite from the stampede. He snicked open the chambers of his own guns, ramming in new shells as a louder murmur drifted through the driving rain. "Here comes the rest of them!"

With full guns the men waited. The fire on the east was less than fifty yards away, and the damp heat of it was notice-

able despite the rain. In front of the camp was a small barricade of dead steers, but the Masked Rider was aware that the real test had not yet been made. It was coming now—a rumbling, roaring, bawling onslaught from below!

The remainder of the herd swept in sight like a dark, crawling flood that had the power to run uphill. Lead steers dashed ahead, and the masked man's Colts again opened the attack. Two of the animals went down, but the main throng was close behind them, shoving on with the brute strength that would crush men and horses and camp equipment beneath its weight. There was no time for talk or thought. There was desperation behind each burning slug, a silent prayer for every animal that toppled and fell.

Guns rattled like tom-toms as a new confusion grew in the herd. The barricade of death in front of the camp grew higher as more steers answered the life-saving lead. As the new leaders began to hesitate doubtfully, the masked rider took time to glance to his left. The fire was pressing in on that side, and he could feel the heat of it through his rain-soaked clothes. But the flames were also a part of his plans, and he did not dread them. It would help force the cattle westward toward the creek, and he knew the time had arrived for the big gamble.

"It's now or never," he shouted above the ear-splitting din of fire and cattle and rain. "Into 'em with swingin' ropes and plenty of yellin'!"

HE ALLOWED no time for hesitation. The robed horseman sent Midnight charging forward, and Blue Hawk urged the gray in behind him. The two mysterious riders led the way, turning, twisting, yelling. Holstering his powder-warmed guns, the robed horseman snatched the rope from his saddlehorn, cutting a determined swath in front of him as he lashed at the puzzled beasts.

A steer bellowed and gave ground, forcing another to turn aside. Blue Hawk swung in behind the two beasts, driving them westward with blood-curdling war whoops. Expert cattlemen that they were, Whit Berry and Cap Maxwell recognized the turn and strengthened it. They swung apart, driving steers into a wedge-shaped formation that followed the Yaqui's move.

As the leaders spied new freedom ahead they broke into a run. Slowly, the great tide of live bodies buckled and broke at the camp grounds, and turned mechanically toward the cooling waters of Nugget Creek. Cap Maxwell's triumphant yell rose above the noise of sucking hoofs. He dropped back to ride with the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk behind the herd, and Whit Berry rode out of the confusion to join them.

All they had to do now was stretch their mounts into a long lope, for the cattle needed no encouragement. The herd reached the scrawny willows and cottonwoods along Nugget Creek and rode the bushes down in its haste to touch water. As more cattle crowded in, they began to move up and down the length of the stream, all of them refusing to travel into the fire which was burning itself out on the opposite bank.

## CHAPTER III

### *Shan Loring*

A DRY summer had left Nugget Creek only half its normal size. But a wide, sandy bed had been carved in wetter years and there was twenty feet of barren soil on each side of the stream. From the east, pasture land led to the brink of the creek, but the western bank was piled high with eroded, sand-whipped rocks, and there was little fuel for the fire on that side. A few embers glowed redly where the flames had touched driftwood lodged between the boulders, but the blaze was quickly dying at the spot where the cattle entered.

Still riding at break-neck speed, the Masked Rider led the way into the creek, plowing a path through the milling cattle. Blue Hawk hurried up beside him, widening an aisle for Whit Berry and Cap Maxwell to follow. Giving Midnight his head, the robed horseman traveled swiftly across to the opposite bank where the rocks and drenching rain had put out the last streamers of fire. To the east flames were still crawling toward Nugget Creek, and the cattle remained nervous and noisy. Some of them clambered out behind the

masked man's mount, and went racing on across the black stubble of the burned-over area. He ignored the beasts now, knowing that many of them would be running and milling and upset until morning.

Cap Maxwell reined up beside the black stallion and brushed a mixture of perspiration and rain from his soot-smeared face.

"Put 'er there, Masked Rider!" the rancher said gratefully, extending a gnarled hand across his mount's neck. "Somebody was out to get me, but I reckon they wasn't so smart as they figgered they was. They didn't take account of you and Blue Hawk!"

With a faint smile tugging at his firm lips, the black-clad man reached out to shake Cap Maxwell's hand. Then suddenly his arm withdrew in a whip-lashing motion. Cap Maxwell stared in surprise as the Masked Rider's Colt came to life in his right hand. The rancher raised his arms hesitantly, then lowered them sheepishly as he saw that the gun was not aimed at him.

The Masked Rider's gaze had lifted beyond Cap Maxwell's stocky shoulders, and the six-gun was pointed at an object in the rocks twenty yards upstream. Lighted by the firelight on the eastern bank, a pair of worn, flat-heeled boots were visible at the edge of the rock. While the Masked Rider watched them expectantly, one of the boots moved, disappeared from sight behind the stone.

"Come out of there!" the robed outlaw commanded grimly. "You, in the rocks come out or I'll cut loose on yuh!"

Always on guard against bounty-hunters who led him an endless chase for his life, the black-clad man had not lost his alertness even in the stampede. He knew the disastrous fire had been no accident, that it had been deliberately started, and he was not certain that the men who had fired the brush were not still lurking in the safety of the twisting stream.

Without a word, Blue Hawk eased his pony farther away from the group on the bank, ready to circle the hidden man if a fight should start. The Masked Rider repeated his command, and then the gun in his hand bucked and roared. Sparks flew from the rough rock as the slug chipped the corner of it and went humming on into the rainy night.

His thumb hooked back the hammer again while he waited for some answer. But he did not have to fire again. A shadowy figure raised up behind the rock and came bounding toward him, whimpering and growling like a frightened pup. Even the steady nerves of the Robin Hood outlaw were jolted as he debated a moment whether the creature was man or beast.

The strange, watery-mouthed voice told him that his eyes had not deceived him about the boots. The man who came toward him moved in a rocking, lumbering gait as if his body were overbalanced as well as his mind. He was as big as a grizzly, and as unkempt and shaggy. Stringy red hair fell from under a battered black hat and was entangled in a ragged beard of the same brilliant hue. From the mass of hair that was both head and face, two yellow-green eyes glared out with a glassy sheen. Dirt-caked Oregon pants were stuffed into the tops of the run-over mining boots and brawny, hairy arms protruded far beyond the cuffs of an ill-fitting flannel shirt.

THE wild-looking red-haired giant stumbled toward the masked man's horse, dragging a half-filled grass sack along the rough earth behind him, his throaty voice still spitting out mushy words.

"Don't shoot me—don't shoot me!" he begged in a monotone. "I'm your old friend, I'm your old friend."

Silent and puzzled, the masked man continued to gaze down at the bedraggled giant, wondering at his odd habit of saying everything twice. He found it took an effort to gaze into those burning green eyes, knowing that they were the windows to a soul crazed by greed or to a mind tortured by imaginary horrors. Part of his curiosity was satisfied then as Cap Maxwell swung to the ground and approached the man with a sympathetic grimace.

"Shan Loring!" Maxwell exclaimed in surprise. "Thank goodness yuh had enough sense to get away from the fire. I might of knowed yuh was somewhere in Moonstone Valley."

Shan Loring took his gaze from the grim figure on the black stallion for the

first time. He looked at Cap Maxwell as if stunned, and then reached out one hairy hand to pat the old rancher's shoulder.

"It's you, Cap. It's you, Cap. We'll pay everything we owe them. Everything we owe. Milo Trapp, too. We'll pay Milo Trapp and shut him up. Shut him up."

Cap Maxwell nodded and put his arm around the red-head's yard-wide shoulders, talking to him in the same soothing tones that he would use to comfort a crying child. As Loring's irritating babble subsided, Maxwell turned back toward the Masked Rider to explain this strange interruption.

Shan Loring did not give him a chance to speak. He turned his eyes again to the black-clad horseman and the Robin Hood outlaw sensed a furtive change in his expression. He tightened his grip on the waiting six-gun, but Shan Loring made no threatening move. Instead he hobbled closer and looked pleadingly up at the mounted man.

"I'll pay you every cent I owe you, every cent I owe you," he jabbered eagerly. "Nobody's going to lose on the Weeping Woman Mine. Nobody. You don't have to wear a mask and use a gun to get what's coming to you from Shan Loring. Not from Shan Loring. I'll pay it all—pay it all!"

While the masked man continued to stare in wonder, the giant red-head pulled the dirty grass sack around in front of him and held the flaps open.

"See! See what I've got! It was a good day. They're all good stones, good stones. You can have the money I get; the money I get for the stones."

After a close, penetrating scrutiny of the bearded face, the Masked Rider dropped his eyes to the sack. Inside were several glistening, blue-white rocks. All of them were about the size of a walnut, small and flat and circular. The black-clad man had been curious about the contents of the sack since the bedraggled creature had first dragged it out of the rock pile. He had expected it to contain something to which Loring would attribute some value, but the sight of the opalescent rocks made him regard the man with a new feeling of pity.

"Moonstones," Cap Maxwell explained as the Masked Rider lifted a questioning glance to the rancher's face. "Some freak of nature left 'em scattered around the granite ledges after volcanoes and hot sun melted the feldspar out of these rocks. Yuh can find a lot of 'em here if yuh hunt hard enough, but they ain't worth much. Back east they polish the best ones and use 'em in jewelry. Shan thinks he can gather up enough of 'em to pay off everybody that bought stock in the Weepin' Woman Mine which left a lot of us broke around here. Yuh'll have to overlook, Shan. He's harmless."

The Masked Rider had been lingering at the creek bank for a reason, and now a glimmer of interest lighted his pale blue eyes as he interrupted Maxwell's explanation.

"Yuh said a lot of people went broke," the masked man pursued. "You, too?"

Maxwell nodded. "Me and Shan Loring, Thad Tate and Grady Sloan. We was hit hardest because we were the owners and are bein' held responsible to everybody that we sold stock to when we raised the money to bring in machinery. I reckon you done figured this fire yuh pulled us out of wasn't no accident, so yuh might as well know what me and Whit think caused it."

HIS seamed face sagging with the fatigue that unpleasant memories brought to him, Cap Maxwell told the Masked Rider the story of the Weeping Woman Mine. The robed outlaw took his eyes from the rancher's face only once during the conversation, and that was when Shan Loring slung the rock-filled sack over his shoulder and went plodding down the edge of the dry creek bed toward the mouth of the hollow. Despite his interest in Cap Maxwell's problem, the disguised horseman could not keep his mind completely off of the shaggy red-head.

Cap Maxwell's story was not an unusual one in a land where countless false gold strikes had raised the hopes of men to soaring heights one moment and then smashed them into impoverished dejection the next. But the repercussions of Maxwell's mining venture were of such a tragic and mysterious nature that the Masked Rider was deeply concerned.

It had been Shan Loring who had plunged Moonstone Valley into an uproar

four years ago. At that time, Loring had just arrived from the East where he had studied mineralogy and mining in some of the best schools. After a few months of prospecting, he had struck what appeared to be a rich vein of gold. Not having sufficient wealth to finance a large-scale mining operation, he had sought help from some of the ranchers in Moonstone Valley.

Three of the cattlemen, Cap Maxwell, Grady Sloan and Thad Tate had joined with Shan Loring to form the Nugget Creek Mining Company. They had sold stock in the organization to several other people, promising them a rich interest rate on their investment.

Maxwell, Sloan and Tate had mortgaged their ranches and put every dollar they could scrape together into mining machinery and tools. The mine opened amid all the bustle and excitement that would accompany any unveiling of a treasure chest—and closed a month later without having produced enough color to meet its payroll.

Expensive machinery was pulled out of the ground and freighted back to the dealers who reclaimed it for unpaid debts. Stockholders not only received no interest, but lost their initial investment as well. Thad Tate, Grady Sloan and Cap Maxwell were left penniless. They turned back to their ranches, now neglected and burdened by mortgages which were to be paid within five years from the date of issue.

"The shock of it all left Shan sort of—well, loco," Maxwell concluded wearily. "He thinks everybody he sees is a stockholder, and he keeps thinkin' he can pay 'em off with moonstones. Poor hombre don't know that it was me and the others who had the load of that job on our shoulders. But he keeps tryin'. Ships two-three boxes of them rocks a week, but mebbe one out of ten is bought for jewelry back east. Lately some fool road agent has been holdin' up the stage and stealin' them. No wonder Shan is crazy! I'm almost crazy myself, what with everybody afraid to work for me, and debts pilin' up against the Diamond Cross."

With Maxwell's words running through his mind, the masked man studied the rancher's ruddy face a while in silence. Then he said:

"You talk like you're tryin' to make

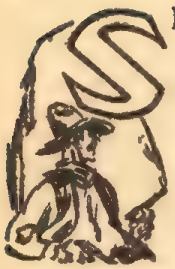
The giant redhead reached for Morgan and fastened an iron grip upon his shoulder (CHAP. VI)

up these losses all by yourself. I understand why Shan Loring doesn't help, but what about Sloan and Tate?"

"They're dead," Maxwell replied softly. "Killed right near the Weepin' Woman Mine. The mine is about two miles below here on the creek. What's more, Sloan's daughter Velma ain't been seen since she found her pa on the trail and brought him in to Cactus for burial. Somebody is after us all! The fire was meant to get me."

## CHAPTER IV

### *Bounty Hunters*



SHUDDERING at the memory of the fiery death he had narrowly escaped, Cap Maxwell let his eyes wander back over the milling cattle in the creek to the wisps of fire that were dying out on the far bank and leaving the hollow dark and dreary. The rain, running off his seamed face like teardrops, added to the sadness of his countenance and the Masked Rider knew that Maxwell had lost much tonight. It would take days to gather the scattered cattle again.

In his brief talk with the man, the Robin Hood outlaw had learned much of the character of Cap Maxwell and it aroused a sincere desire to help the old rancher. Maxwell was of that rare school whose dominating trait was an untarnished honesty. To treat his fellow man fairly was an obsession with Maxwell. Where other men would have sought exclusion behind laws and customs, Maxwell had willingly assumed the burden of repaying all who had lost money in the Weeping Woman Mine. He felt that his undying honesty was the one gift that would carve his name among the immortals of the frontier, and to deny its fulfillment was like extinguishing the spark of his soul, drowning his spirit and leaving him alone in the world without purpose or intent. It was a difficult thing to understand for most men, as all sacrifices seem fatalistic and foolish to those who do not possess the goodness to make them.

But the Masked Rider understood the torture of Maxwell's frustrated ambition, sympathized with him because of the threats that menaced his life. Even now the damp, pungent air that swept into the hollow from Moonstone Valley seemed heavy with mystery and peril, and the masked man felt that death still stalked its dark recesses. He was impatient to retire to the hills from whence he had come a short while before, for he had already remained in the open longer than was his custom. He glanced across at Blue Hawk, found the Yaqui fidgeting impatiently in the saddle, but still he continued to question the rancher about events preceding the fire.

It was no accident that the Masked Rider had been near Moonstone Valley tonight, and he wanted to learn all he could about the mystery that surrounded the place. Word of Cap Maxwell's troubled ranch had traveled all the way to Texas. There, from a wandering cowboy who had left the Diamond Cross as soon as he had learned that its owner might be earmarked for death like the others of the mining firm, Blue Hawk had heard the story and relayed it to the Masked Rider.

Knowing that here was a man whose life was haunted by fear and worry every minute, the Robin Hood outlaw had pointed Midnight's nose immediately toward Arizona. They had just arrived on the granite rim of Moonstone Valley when the first streamers of fire had shot across the little hollow in the northern corner of the crater. Bawling cattle and yelling men had told them of trouble below, and they had ridden recklessly to help them.

"I've heard a lot about yuh, Masked Rider," Cap Maxwell said hopefully as he answered the robed outlaw's last question, "and I want yuh to know I'm believin' only the good part after what yuh done tonight. If yuh'd be good enough to sign on with me, I might be able to scrape together enough cash to pay yuh to get to the bottom of what's goin' on here."

"And what he ain't got, I'll make up," Whit Berry added firmly. "I've got a little saved, and if you could just dig up the coyote that made way with Velma that's all I'd ask. You could leave the rest to me." The tall foreman patted his twin Colts, and a hard glint came into his steely eyes.

The Masked Rider thought hurriedly for some word of encouragement for the

two troubled men. But he did not have time to utter those words.

Blue Hawk reined his gray pony swiftly alongside the stallion, and the masked man sensed the Yaqui's alarm.

"We must go, Senor," Blue Hawk said urgently. He spoke perfect English in the meticulous manner taught him by padres in the mission schools he had attended in his youth. And the only name he ever used for the black-clad horseman, regardless of the role the man might be playing, was "Senor."

"What's the trouble, Hawk?" the masked man asked quickly.

"There are sounds in the night, Senor. I think there is someone in the rocks ahead of us. With the rain it is hard to—"

"You're wrong, redskin," a growling voice broke in calmly. "We're right behind yuh. Don't move a muscle or we'll collect a reward on dead bodies instead of men!"

REALIZING that he should have obeyed the Yaqui's unfailing senses without question, the Masked Rider whirled quickly in the saddle. Two men came cautiously out from the dark rocks, both hunched tensely over the six-guns in their hands. They had come from downstream, the soft sand along the creek muffling their footsteps until they had crept within a few feet of the masked man.

The man who had spoken came first, a stocky, dark-skinned man with burly shoulders. His black sullen eyes darted nervously around under shaggy dark brows as he approached the robed outlaw with two guns cocked in his fists. A step behind him, and a little to the left, walked a stringy, square-shouldered man in dudish range dress. A Colt was gripped in his right hand, and his shifty gray eyes had already selected a target on the Masked Rider's chest.

Though he had never seen the men before, they were not complete strangers to the black-clad horseman. A few moments before, Cap Maxwell had spoken of his two night riders, thinking they had escaped through the mouth of the hollow before the fire closed in. But they, too, had sought refuge in the creek farther south. The Masked Rider's first guess at their identity proved correct. The burly, dark-eyed man was Hobe Venter and the stringy gunman in the scarlet shirt and white Stetson was Stacy Lipps.

Whit Berry was the first to speak when the men stepped into view, and the tall foreman's voice was heavy with anger.

"Hobe Venter and Stacy Lipps!" Berry said coldly. "So yuh thought of the creek as a place to save yore own necks, but didn't offer to drive the cattle this way before they stampeded. Mebbe yuh wanted them cows to trample me and Cap!"

Venter and Lipps ignored Whit Berry's reprimand, stepping apart so that one of them could cover the robed outlaw and the other Blue Hawk.

"This is my lucky night," Hobe Venter continued in his guttural voice as he faced the mounted men. "I reckon Sheriff Walt Starns will be countin' reward money into my paws all day when I take you in. You're probably the same gent that's been holdin' up the Cactus stage for the past three months. Starns has rode hisself sore tryin' to catch that road agent!"

Gaunt old Cap Maxwell moved his horse forward a step and glared down at the two gunmen, cursing angrily. He reminded them of the help he had received from the Masked Rider and his Indian companion, ordered Venter to put his gun away. Whit Berry joined the rancher's appeal, his hands hovering threateningly over his guns.

"You put them irons away or yuh're through at the Diamond Cross," the foreman warned.

Venter answered him with a rattling chuckle, his eyes daring Whit Berry to complete his draw. "Both of yuh save yore wind. Yuh can't fire me. I quit an hour ago. There ain't enough dinero in Arizony to get me back on that spread, 'cause Cap Maxwell's got the coffin sign on him and yuh can't tell who he might take with him when he goes. I'd rather have the bounty on this Masked Rider lobo. Climb down, mister, and make it slow."

During the exchange between Venter and the others, the Masked Rider had remained motionless in the saddle, his arms slightly raised. The greedy gleam in the stocky man's eyes had told him how the argument would end, but it had given him time to think. The masked man glanced covertly at Blue Hawk, his blue eyes turning the color of glistening ice.

It was a silent signal, and the Yaqui understood.

While Venter waited for his command to be obeyed, the Masked Rider swung one leg slowly out of the stirrup as if to dismount. Instantly he was sailing through the air in a daring leap. At the same time, Blue Hawk whirled to the ground like a springing bobcat.

Hobe Venter did not have time to shoot. He didn't even have time to think. The black-clad horseman came at him like a swooping hawk. One hundred ninety pounds of bone and muscle smacked Venter down, making his guns useless as the Masked Rider landed on top of him.

VENTER spat out a muffled curse as the masked man's ballooning black robe smothered his words. He stuck up a stiffened arm, tried to push the masked man away as they landed in the muddy soil. But the Masked Rider was like a dark, choking shadow. His broad shoulder weaved aside as Venter threw a fist at him, and then his own right hand smashed solidly against the burly man's thick lips, leaving them split and bloody. Pain sent a desperate strength through Venter's muscles and he heaved the masked man aside. The robed outlaw jumped to his feet like an acrobat as Venter reared up.

Roaring with fury, the gunman charged, both fists whirling in front of him. They would have been killing blows if they had landed, but they were without skill. The Masked Rider stepped lightly aside. Before Venter realized he had no target, the masked man's gloved fist cracked into the side of his head.

Venter wobbled like a drunken tenderfoot. He tried to shake his head, but the Masked Rider shook it for him with a back-hand blow, full of knuckles and leverage. Venter's jaw cracked like wind-whipped canvas as the back of the robed outlaw's right hand slapped him flatly.

His head fell over on his shoulder, and his feet went grotesquely the other way. The Masked Rider stood over him, ready to administer the trimmings to a finished fight. But Whit Berry declared the battle ended before Venter could struggle to his feet.

Still seeking an outlet for the anger the men had aroused in him, Whit Berry drew his guns as Venter went down the second time.

"Get up, Venter," Berry ordered, "and take Stacy Lipps back to where yuh left yore horses. When yuh get there, ride hard and don't come back to the Diamond Cross. It's me and you, when you do, Venter!"

Shrugging, the Masked Rider turned aside and looked for Blue Hawk. The Yaqui was sitting astraddle Stacy Lipps' chest, his knees pinning the nattily-dressed man's arms down and his powerful hands clutching Lipps' throat in a throttling iron grip. Blue Hawk was working without sound, without expression, but with deadly purpose. He was not a killer by nature, but he lived by the law of self-preservation, and Lipps had staked his life against the Indian's own.

Swiftly, the Masked Rider moved over and touched the Yaqui's shoulder. Blue Hawk arose wordlessly and looked down at Stacy Lipps' writhing body. Air surged back into the slim gunman's lungs, and he lay there gasping like a dying calf. Then slowly he opened his eyes, cleared his throat painfully, and sat up.

Venter was helping him to his feet as Blue Hawk and the black-clad outlaw walked to their horses and swung back into saddle, their clothing squashing with wetness.

"Move on, Lipps," Whit Berry repeated grimly as the two men hesitated a few feet away, and then hurried on into the night. Cap Maxwell also had his Colt in his lap now, and the two men kept their eyes southward until they could no longer hear the gunmen's footsteps.

At last the old rancher nodded approvingly at his foreman and turned toward the spot where the Masked Rider's stallion had stood.

"Well, mister, what do yuh say to that offer I made—"

He realized he was talking to himself then, and grew silent. He met Whit Berry's puzzled glance and then squinted his eyes again into the darkness. Far up the gloomy creek-bed he saw the faint shadow of a flapping cloak and the dingy outline of a pair of mud-caked drill pants. Then the two strange riders were swallowed by the night.

"Come from nowhere, go back to nowhere," he mused thoughtfully. "We might as well hit out for the Diamond Cross,

Whit. Eight more miles through this rain, and I'll be ready for bed. You think we'll ever see them two hombres again, Whit? The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk, that is?"

The tall foreman shifted wearily in his damp saddle. "I think we might."

He shook out his reins and nudged his horse forward, pointing southward toward the Diamond Cross. "It's a wet night, cold and lonesome. I wonder where Velma is tonight."

Cap Maxwell's shoulders sagged slightly as he looked at the young cowboy's face and did not reply. In his heart was a prayer that the miracles he had heard accredited to the Masked Rider were not mere legend, and that the Robin Hood rider had recognized the need of his help in Moonstone Valley.

## CHAPTER V

### *Council in the Hills*

RIDING in silence, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk cut away from the creek as soon as they were out of Cap Maxwell's sight. It took them only a few minutes to climb the saw-toothed ridge which sheltered the dog-leg hollow, and there they paused to collect the horses they had left when they rode down to stop the stampede.

The Yaqui dismounted and fastened lead ropes to a pinto pack-norse and the hammerhead roan which he had left hobbled on the brushy slope. While Blue Hawk anchored the horses in position to be led, the Masked Rider remained in the saddle, his eyes roving the dark land below him. At this height, he could see beyond the hollow's entrance, but the heavy darkness shrouded the great circular basin of Moonstone Valley. He was reviewing the strange incidents in which he had played a part tonight, and his thoughts were of tomorrow when he would pursue the questions that came to his mind as a result of them.

At a glance from Blue Hawk, who had remounted after securing the horses, the masked man spoke quietly to Midnight and moved on behind the Yaqui. They were looking for a suitable camping site, and this was a time when the Indian assumed leadership of the hard-riding team. His unerring instincts always guided him to a place of safety and convenience.

For half an hour they rode the crest of the ridge northward. At last they came to the base of a higher range, and Blue Hawk climbed on into the sparse junipers and pines until he reached the face of a sheer rock cliff. A small spring gushed out from the rocks, and nearby there was a cup-shaped depression in the cliff which the rain had not touched. Sweet mountain grass grew in tufts where the trees were farther apart, providing ample food for the horses.

"We will camp here, Senor," Blue Hawk said quietly, and immediately began making preparations. Dismounting, the Masked Rider removed his saddle and bed-roll from Midnight's back, and the Yaqui led the horses away and hobbled them for the night.

While he was gone, the Masked Rider gathered dry twigs and scattered deadwood along the base of the cliff and

[*Turn page*]

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started a fire. As usual, Blue Hawk had chosen a position with all the caution and foresight the two riders of the danger trails constantly exercised. Here they could not be approached from behind, and were invisible from above because of the cavelike cavity in the rocks. Still it was near enough to Moonstone Valley for them to reach it quickly if the occasion demanded their presence there.

Presently the Yaqui returned and rummaged for food and cooking utensils in the pack which the pinto had carried. When the meal was prepared, and both men were sitting against the heated rock wall with good food before them and the fire taking the dampness from their clothes, Blue Hawk mentioned their recent experience for the first time.

In a characteristically frank manner, the Yaqui put his plate aside and looked at the masked man beside him.

"What do you make of it, Senor?" he asked quietly. He knew where the Masked Rider's thoughts lay at that moment.

It was some time before the robed outlaw replied, and Blue Hawk did not press him for an answer. Though he knew nothing of the man's past, not even his real name, the Yaqui was aware that at some time the Masked Rider had undergone extensive education. It was rumored that he had come from a family of high social and financial standing before some unknown incident had sent him forth on a trail of vengeance and reparation which he now rode without reservation. Blue Hawk had no proof that these things were true, and asked none, but he did know that the man had keen powers of observation and perception. It was these qualities, backed by a pair of lightning-fast guns and merciless fists, that had pulled the Robin Hood outlaw above the channels of common men. His confidence in the black-clad man's ability made Blue Hawk wait patiently now for his views.

ACTUALLY, the Masked Rider had not had time to draw any definite conclusions. Like Cap Maxwell, he agreed that the Weeping Woman Mine was responsible, directly or indirectly, for the reign of terror that was gaining momentum in Moonstone Valley. Two of the four men who had organized the mining firm had already died violent deaths. The remaining two partners, Cap Maxwell and Shan Loring, seemed to be leading a tortuous existence.

Shan Loring was apparently the more miserable of the two. His great disappointment had affected his mind, leaving him a babbling, annoying mental wreck whose one driving thought was to gather enough moonstones in a hopeless attempt to repay those whom he had failed. Still there was something sinister and elusive about the giant redhead, and it was this more than his misfortune which made him unforgettable to the Masked Rider.

Burdened by a crushing indebtedness, Cap Maxwell's inordinate honesty had almost proved his undoing. The old rancher had personally promised each stockholder that their investment was a sound one, and that promise was as important to him as his life. Year after year he had taken all the money he could earn to make regular payments in accord with his promise.

In the meantime he had neglected other obligations, and now his very livelihood—his ranch—was in jeopardy. Maxwell had enough cattle on his scattered range to pay off the mortgage against his spread, but was unable to keep enough men to round them up for market. With his latest roundup crew gone, his cattle spooked and scattered, Maxwell was about ready to admit defeat.

Out of his last riding crew, Maxwell had made two bad choices—Hobe Venter and Stacy Lipps. In addition to the attempt to capture him for the bounty on his head, the Masked Rider had other reasons to dislike Venter and Lipps. The men had the unmistakable brand of the owlhoot written in their manner and appearance, and such men were his natural foes.

Cap Maxwell's explanation of the situation in the hollow just before the fire started had also left a mark of suspicion in the masked man's mind. Venter's swinging lariat could have been a signal to the men who set the fire that it was time for them to act. The absence of any alarm from the night riders when Maxwell discovered the blaze strengthened this belief.

Presently the Masked Rider stood up slowly and shoved the embers of the fire closer together with his foot. Like the polished black leather of his holsters, his

boots were plain and undecorated. They had no distinctive markings that might identify them as belonging to the Masked Rider if he still wore them when he was unmasked.

"Looks like a matter of vengeance, Hawk," the black-clad man said then. "Somebody that lost money in that mine might be impatient with Maxwell's slow way of payin' em back. Some other rancher might have lost his shirt in that deal, and that kind of grudge is hard to forget. At least a man named Thad Tate and another named Grady Sloan got killed for some reason. Both of 'em died with their eyes bugged out and their mouths twisted like they was scared to death, accordin' to Maxwell. Tate had been shot in the stomach, but Sloan had been pulled off his horse and beaten to death with a rock. Half his skull was caved in."

Blue Hawk nodded and looked up, noticing that the Masked Rider's blue eyes had again faded to that wintry bleakness that reflected his disapproval and anger. He was staring off into the darkness toward Moonstone Valley and his brown hands were clenching and relaxing in rhythmic movements, as if they were impatient for action.

"We've bumped square into a death fight, Hawk, and I don't like what I found," the robed outlaw continued after a brief pause.

"The Weeping Woman Mine was aptly named, Senor," Blue Hawk conceded solemnly. "It comes from an ancient Indian legend about squaws who made the creeks with tears shed over warriors who did not return from battle. Ah, yes, the mine has brought its owners sorrow."

ONCE more the masked man kicked impatiently at the fire. "Maybe we can do somethin' about that. I feel right sorry for Cap Maxwell and the young foreman who has lost his sweetheart. It must be hard for Maxwell to lay down at night and sleep, considerin' that he might be the killer's next victim."

"There is much cruelty here, Senor," Blue Hawk declared forcefully. "Even the loco one, this Shan Loring, has no rest from hate. Loring's moonstones are being stolen by some bandit. They are of no rich value, and it is like robbing the blind or an old woman. It is a bitter joke to punish him!"

The robed outlaw made no comment about Shan Loring's stolen moonstones, but it was a circumstance that puzzled him. Hobe Venter had sought to connect the Masked Rider with the stage robberies and he had said Sheriff Walt Starns was eager to capture the bandit. Though most frontier lawmen were competent and conscientious, the Robin Hood rider had learned that in counties as sparsely settled as this one they were usually notoriously lazy. Few would brave the rocky trails and burning sun of a region like Moonstone Valley in search for a bandit who had committed no greater crime than to steal a few rocks from an addled prospector. It made him eager to meet Walt Starns and learn more about the stage robberies for which the Masked Rider might be blamed in the future.

Peering keenly at his silent companion, Blue Hawk said shrewdly: "You have other thoughts, Senor. We will stay and help these people?"

Momentarily the firm brown face beneath the domino mask relaxed and the Masked Rider chuckled. "You want that as much as I do, Hawk. Even if we are liable to stick our necks in the noose that's waitin' for Cap Maxwell. But neither of us aim to let that old feller die if we can help it. Besides, I don't like the thought of some girl bein' in the hands of the gent that got Sloan and Tate."

Kneeling, the masked man began loosening the ropes on his bedroll. "We'll get some sleep, Hawk, and then take a hand in this game. I've got a feelin' it's a hand that'll have to hold a fast gun!"

## CHAPTER VI

### *Where Death Waits*

CROUCHED down across from Blue Hawk at the cook-fire which the Yaqui built near the towering white cliff the next morning, was a man who had little resemblance to the grim, black-clad horseman who had accompanied the Indian here the night before.

He was a tall man, dark-haired and muscular. The energy and vitality that

sparkled in his pale blue eyes seemed to contradict itself in the leisurely way the man moved about, and in the mellow drawl of his voice. A glance at the roll-brimmed brown Stetson perched cockily on one side of his head, and the rugged handsomeness of his face showed that he was easy-going, good-natured and accustomed to the feel of sun and wind in his face.

His soft flannel shirt and plain cowboy levis fitted him well enough to reveal cords of powerful muscle stretched across his six-foot frame. The worn butts of the twin .45 Colts thonged to his thighs proved that the guns belonged to a man who used them.

"So it is a job for Wayne Morgan," Blue Hawk said eagerly, scraping a generous portion of bacon and eggs into the cowboy's plate.

The dark-haired waddy nodded, grinning at Blue Hawk's apparent pleasure over the prospect of action which Wayne Morgan's appearance in a town always foretold. The hammerhead roan which replaced the stallion when the Masked Rider assumed the role of a wandering cowboy was saddled and waiting. The robe and mask which the Robin Hood outlaw had worn the night before were stored in his bedroll.

"That's right, Hawk," Morgan replied between mouthfuls of food. "The Diamond Cross ought to be able to use either a gunhand or a rider. At least that's where I'm headin'. I hope Maxwell's luck held through the night, 'cause from here out Wayne Morgan is goin' to hang close to his coat tail. If the gent that got Tate and Sloan comes to the Diamond Cross lookin' for trouble then, he'll find it"

Still discussing the peculiar task which they had wilfully accepted in Moonstone Valley, the two men finished their meal in the leisurely fashion of those who realize that fate might easily decree it as their last. It was always this way with the Robin Hood outlaw and his Indian companion. Though they did not speak of it, they both realized that to side with Cap Maxwell was to defy the wrath of the same mysterious marauder who had turned the old rancher's life into a nightmare of fear.

As Morgan arose, Blue Hawk walked along beside him until the dark-haired cowboy mounted the hammerhead roan. Morgan knew why he was there, for neither the wandering cowboy nor the Masked Rider ever played a lone hand when battling against the one-sided odds piled up by a lawless combine. An expert with knife, rifle or six-gun, the faithful Yaqui had more than once saved his companion's life, making stronger the many bonds that bound together the legendary team.

In answer to Blue Hawk's unspoken question, Morgan said: "You're job is to check up on a few facts in Cactus, Hawk. Find out all you can about the stage robberies. It will be hard for the Masked Rider to work here as long as he's connected with that."

Nodding, Blue Hawk raised his hand in a farewell salute as Wayne Morgan reined the roan toward Moonstone Valley. The cowboy rode slouched and loose-joined in the saddle, his lips pursed in a melancholy whistle as he cut through the junipers and pines and worked toward the rocky trail that wound down into the valley. He drifted along like any aimless rider who had answered the call of far-off trails, but his pale blue eyes were keenly alive beneath the shading brim of his Stetson. For, though he had changed his dress and appearance and had adopted a soft Texas drawl in place of the Masked Rider's deep-chested tones, the same tense thoughts that had weighted the mind of the robed outlaw were now held by Wayne Morgan.

IN THE eye-piercing light of the fiery morning sun which had swiftly evaporated all signs of the night's rain, Wayne Morgan found Moonstone Valley strangely dead and still. Having skirted the cowtown of Cactus to the south, and much of the valley's rim the day before, the dark-haired waddy had already memorized a sketchy map of the region.

He passed quickly over the burned-over stubble of the little dog-leg hollow, noticing that most of Cap Maxwell's cattle had strayed again into the by-passing gulleys and arroyos that broke away from the western bank of Nugget Creek. This was land owned by no one, but used by the Diamond Cross for winter range because of the protection of the forked ridges and the grass provided by the stream. He had heard the rancher say that the home

ranch was some eight miles to the south.

Coming out of the mouth of the hollow was like going from one world to another. Brush and grass faded abruptly into a labyrinth of upthrust boulders, eroded rust-red spires and steep-walled canyons. Deceptive rock slides changed the trail day by day, filling one path and opening another. Even Nugget Creek had not tried to solve the riddle of passage here, and the lack of water made the northern half of Moonstone Valley barren. The creek delved underground a short distance below the mouth of the hollow, appeared again two miles farther on at the Weeping Woman Mine and then tunneled through subterranean depths for many more miles before it reappeared just outside of Cactus.

Morgan held to the banks of the creek as long as it lasted, and then tackled the maze of canyons and draws that glared at him from all angles. Several wrong guesses brought him to a dead end, and he retraced himself many times before he finally spotted a patch of green a half mile to his left. He paused on a slight rise to orient himself, for he knew the tiny oasis marked the approximate location of the deserted gold mine. Maxwell had said the claim was near a gulch where Nugget Creek again came to the surface.

His thoughts leaving the problem of travel for a moment to go back to the things Cap Maxwell had told him of the ill-fated mine, Morgan remained idle longer than he had intended. About him the air was hot and stifling. Even the lizards and crickets had been stilled by this first fiery blast of the demon sun. But it was the noiseless, lifeless calm that made the air seem so heavy with menace and Morgan searched mentally for the weird secret hidden by the dead drab rocks that stretched before him. Only the short stretch of water ahead gave a scrap of life to the place, and it was there that life had ended.

"If Tate and Sloan had already given it up," Morgan mused aloud, "I wonder what they was doin' over there at the mine when they was killed."

The dark-haired waddy had expected no answer to his perplexity at that moment, and the sound of a voice from behind startled him. Morgan had wheeled his horse until there was a narrow ledge at his back, and the eerie stillness had hinted of no other presence. Now he whirled around in alarm, kneeing his horse the same way as he turned. The throaty, mush tones had told him what he would find.

Shan Loring said only one word as he stared down at Wayne Morgan.

"Fools!" Loring spat fiercely. The giant red-headed man stood beside the flat piece of rock which had sheltered him when Morgan appeared. Standing on the ledge at a level with Morgan's saddle, his massive shoulders slightly hunched and his knotted fists dangling near his bent knees, Shan Loring towered above the mounted man like a hairy, evil-faced monster.

He was not sure that the wild-looking miner could grasp any simple truth, but Morgan decided it would be best to humor Shan Loring, agree with anything he said. The angry, burning light in the man's green eyes warned the cowboy to be on guard.

"I reckon you're mighty near right, pard," Morgan drawled quietly. "Any cattleman that starts messin' around with minin' is askin' for trouble. There's cattlemen and there's miners, and yuh seldom find one man that makes a good thing out of both."

THE redhead's staring eyes never wavered, failed to show any glimmer or agreement or disagreement, and Morgan felt his words were wasted.

"You killed them—killed them both!" Loring grated through bearded lips. "Yuh killed my friends and I've waited for you."

Morgan frowned in a puzzled way and held up a restraining hand. "Now, look, mister. I'm a stranger hereabouts and ain't never killed—"

Shan Loring did not give him time to finish. The giant redhead let go of the ledge and fastened upon Morgan—over two hundred pounds of wild brute force intent upon destroying the man on the horse. Morgan had known it was coming, had dreaded it. He was at a disadvantage in more ways than one. He could not kill the big miner, for a man in Shan Loring's condition could hardly be held responsible for his actions. On the other hand, if Loring killed Morgan it would be regarded merely as an unfortunate cir-

cumstance and the crazed man would receive no punishment.

Morgan had little time to think about these things. Shan Loring's immense body slammed into him like a thunderbolt, knocking him out of the saddle and crushing him to the hard ground. Sparks exploded across the cowboy's vision and a roaring waterfall grew up in his head under the shocking impact. He rolled a few feet along the sloping rise, Shan Loring grunting and snorting as he came after him.

Any sympathy Morgan might have had for the man was destroyed. In spite of his outward serenity, the dark-haired cowboy had shared more rough and tumble fights than he could count. Experience had made him an expert with his fists, and it had taught him to recognize motives as well. Regardless of what imaginary grudge had stirred him to such savagery, Morgan knew there could be no immunity for the miner. Unless he was stopped, Shan Loring meant to kill Wayne Morgan with his bare hands!

As Morgan stopped his fall at last, the bearded man was almost on top of him. The cowboy started to stand up to meet the charge and then ducked quickly back to the ground. Loring covered the last few feet in a mighty leap, trying to jump straight into the dark-haired waddy's face. Hugging the ground, Morgan watched his chance. His hand darted out, gripped one of the miner's flying feet and held on.

Shan Loring fell like a felled tree, his meaty body crunching flatly as he landed. For a brief instant his senses seemed restored. He cursed furiously with pain, jerked his leg free. He was up again like a cat, a smudge of blood mixed with the dirt in his stringy beard.

Wayne Morgan clambered up in front of him, hard fists cocked expectantly. But Loring did not rush him. The giant redhead started a slow, pacing circle around the cowboy. His even white teeth gleamed like ivory buried in red velvet as the beard parted at the lips in a determined scowl.

"Yuh may be too far gone to reason with," Morgan said tightly, "but mebbe yuh can still learn a lesson. Come and get it, pard!"

Shan Loring accepted the challenge. Swift and sure as a cougar, he glided in and slung a mauling fist at the cowboy's square chin. There was a speed in the man which Morgan had not contemplated, and the blow almost caught him napping. He saw it in time to lift a shoulder, but that hard, hairy fist still left a stinging bruise on Morgan's jaw.

Morgan did not wait for the miner again. He carried the fight to Loring, dancing in close and feinting to draw the man's guard down. At first he thought his strategy was successful, for Shan Loring's chin was an easy target.

Bunching his s h o u l d e r s, Morgan smashed his left hand into the bearded face. Loring stumbled back a step, but the cowboy's fist felt like it had just struck a rock wall. There was more power in the cowboy's right, however, and Morgan edged in to deliver the blow. His fist shot over the redhead's shoulder as Loring dodged aside, and Morgan knew he had walked into a trap!

APPARENTLY the bearded man was unable to cope with Morgan's style of battle, for his broad, perspiring face was still unguarded. But there was deadly purpose behind Shan Loring's shattered defense. He had dropped his burly arms to his sides, luring the cowboy in close. Now those long, sinewy arms shot out and grabbed the cowboy around the waist, dragging him in like steel tentacles.

Before Mogan could tear himself free, Shan Loring had his fingers locked, his chin boring into the cowboy's chest and was crushing him in a powerful bear-hug. As the vise-like grip tightened on him, Morgan felt his spine groaning with the strain. Dizziness crept through him as his lungs were choked off by the pressure. His knees grew weak and uncertain, and the roar returned to his head.

He pounded the giant's back with his fists, jabbed at the man's ribs, but Shan Loring held on. Morgan bit his lips and braced his feet in an attempt to break the stranglehold; Loring only grunted louder, bored harder with his chin and strained to cave the cowboy's ribs with his mighty strength.

Bells chimed frantically in Morgan's ears, warning him that unconsciousness was not far off. He tried to force his foggy mind to answer his needs, but weakness

made planning a strenuous chore. Then the reflexes that had guided him through worse battles sprang to life, and Morgan abruptly sagged in Loring's arms. That sudden surrender of his entire weight made the man lose balance, tumble forward. Morgan gave him momentum by shoving his feet against the ground and heaving upward.

Loring went sailing over Morgan's back as his arms slipped free. He tumbled down the slope in a flying somersault. The cowboy dashed down the rise behind him, gasping for air and blinking his eyes to keep his senses.

Shaking his head like an angered bull, Shan Loring tried to scramble to his feet, but Wayne Morgan didn't give him a chance. He had been too easy with the man at first, seeking to bluff him out of the fight. But now he spared nothing.

Without waiting for the man to rise, the cowboy reached down and gripped the front of his dirty flannel shirt, yanked him upright. As soon as he had him that way, he shoved his right fist into his face like a battering ram. He dropped him, and then hauled him up again, repeating the same pattern.

Loring tried to fight back, tugged at his shirt and kicked wickedly at Morgan's abdomen, but the dark-haired waddy's own anger was stirred now, and nothing could stop him. He flattened Loring on the ground four times, and still the redhead growled and snorted and clawed at him. The fifth time he was as limp as a wet rag when he went down and Morgan let him lay.

His chest heaving with exertion, the dark-haired waddy stood still a minute to collect his strength. And it was then that he got his first close glimpse of Shan Loring's features. Under the brilliant light of the sun, he found that the miner was not as old as he had believed when he saw him the night before. Through the coarse red beard his skin was firm and white, and his eyes had none of the crow-foot wrinkles that come with age. Without the beard and scraggly long hair, Shan Loring would be a rather handsome, square-faced man of about thirty-five

Shrugging, Morgan gave Shan Loring's battered face a final scrutiny and walked back to his horse. The redhead would awake in a few minutes with a sore jaw, but with as much sense as he ever had.

"They ought to put that gent in a home somewhere before he kills somebody," he said to the roan as he mounted and turned again toward the Diamond Cross Ranch. "I hope I never tangle with him again, 'cause he's got more strength in them arms of his than two men ought to have. Can't figure why he jumped me, thataway."

## CHAPTER VII

### *Little Joe*

IT WAS almost noon when Morgan finally found his way out of the rocks and rode down through green-topped knolls and over a level plain that looked more like cattle country. Several small streams cut through these hills, and the dark-haired

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cowboy selected one of these as his guide and followed its course.

A few minutes later he rode through a stand of walnut trees and saw the buildings of a ranch ahead. Since the fight with Shan Loring he had been traveling chiefly by instinct, utilizing all his plains lore, and he was rewarded with success when he saw that the horses in the pole corral wore the Diamond Cross brand. There was no one in sight around the long, low-roofed bunkhouse nearby, and Morgan went on to the sprawling, adobe house fifty yards away.

He had just dropped his reins, and was stepping from saddle when Whit Berry and Cap Maxwell walked down from the pillared veranda. They stopped at his horse's head, regarding him silently until Morgan spoke. Both men looked far more beaten and exhausted now than they had last night. But since he knew them only as the Masked Rider, the dark-haired waddy veiled his curiosity and grinned amiably. He was more determined than ever to make a good impression here, for he wanted to know what had kept Maxwell and Whit Berry from their beds after the stampede was over.

"The name's Wayne Morgan, gents," the cowboy drawled quietly. "The occupation is workin' a little, ridin' a whole lot. Right now I'm hankerin' to work a little."

Whit Berry returned Morgan's friendly grin, evidently impressed by the cowboy's happy-go-lucky attitude. He introduced himself and the gaunt, gray-haired rancher, and Morgan shook hands with them. Afterward, nothing more was said while Maxwell and the foreman sized up the husky, quiet-spoken waddy who seemed unconcerned about their close scrutiny. Actually, Morgan was still speculating on the sleepless dark circles under the eyes of the others.

"What can you do?" Maxwell asked at last. "We ain't exactly needin' a single rider unless he's good enough to round up a herd of fire-scared cattle all by himself."

Morgan seemed to give the cattleman's question a lot of thought before he answered. He glanced at the coiled rope on his saddlehorn, hooked his thumbs against his belt just above the jutting butts of his two black Colts and grinned at the rancher.

"I won't grow old here nor break my back, but I'll do yuh a day's work every time yuh ask it."

It was the kind of answer Cap Maxwell had expected from a man who had all the appearance of a tophand, and the tired lines of his face faded momentarily as he chuckled. Then he told Morgan frankly that the Diamond Cross was in a difficult financial tangle, and that his wages would be in an uncertain state. While the rancher talked, Morgan noticed that his eyes strayed often to the low-hung guns, and he was certain Whit Berry had made a signal to Maxwell which had aroused suspicion.

"One thing more, Morgan," Maxwell concluded. "I would feel better with a pair of fast guns here, but I'd want to be sure they was square with the law. Now, how—"

Before the rancher could add a question, Wayne Morgan's fingers and wrists had blurred in hazy motion and the twin Colts were dangling in his hands, pointing carelessly at Cap Maxwell's feet. The friendly grin was still on the cowboy's lips. The draw had been made without any visible effort or thought.

Glancing aside at Whit Berry's awed face, Morgan hefted the guns experimentally in his hands.

"Most forgot I had 'em on me," he explained calmly. "But I ain't on the dodge, gents, if that's what's worryin' yuh." He dropped the Colts lightly back in place. "Well, what about the job?"

"By the Saints, yuh're hired, Morgan!" Cap Maxwell stepped forward and clapped the cowboy on the shoulder. "I've set here and shivered and shook long enough for fear some fool was goin' to step in an start throwin' lead at me. Any objections, Whit?"

WHIT BERRY shook his head. "It's a good idea, Cap. Between Morgan and the Masked Rider we might get some things straightened out."

At this outburst of approval, Morgan made no secret of his curiosity about the trouble of which they hinted. Though he had learned most of the facts, he could not reveal his knowledge without risking discovery of his dual identity.

"Whit, you look after his horse," Maxwell said to the foreman. "Come on in the house, Morgan, and I'll tell yuh what

you'll be up against."

Sitting in the comparative coolness of the spacious, well-furnished Diamond Cross living room, Wayne Morgan feigned shocked interest in the story of the weeping Woman Mine. Then suddenly his interest was genuine. Cap Maxwell stood up and started pacing the floor uneasily while he told the cowboy of the incident that had kept him awake all night.

"Somethin' happened last night that should give me new hope," Maxwell said, rubbing his jutting chin thoughtfully, "but it just worries me more. I'm afraid it's some kind of bait, and a man livin' on borrowed time can't afford to bite on nothin'. But gosh knows I need the money!"

"Somebody offered to lend yuh some money?" Morgan asked.

"Gold!" Cap Maxwell declared. "Not lend, but give it to me. A little while after me'n Whit got back here from Moonstone Valley last night, we heard a horse come up to the bunkhouse. It was there just a minute, and then gone again. When we both run out to investigate we found a buckskin pouch layin' in front of the door. It was filled with gold—little chunks of metal that looks like it had been took from mother lode!"

Wayne Morgan shared Cap Maxwell's doubt at that moment. This rich gift from an anonymous midnight prowler held the same hint of mystery that characterized every incident which evolved from Cap Maxwell's mining loss.

"Any idea where it came from—or why?" the cowboy asked in perplexity.

Whit Berry, the tall foreman, had returned from the corral in time to hear Morgan's question. He walked across the room now, withdrawing a small slip of paper from the pocket of his calfskin vest.

"We know exactly where it come from," Berry said, "and that's what puzzles us most. Why should some hombre who seems to be punishin' one partner, try to make it up to the other one."

Not until he had taken the slip of paper from the tall youngster's hand did Wayne Morgan understand Maxwell's nervousness. It was a printed note, and Morgan was impressed by the neatness and brevity of the message:

I SAW YOUR HERD SCATTERED LAST NIGHT.
YOU DESERVE THIS FOR THE DAMAGE.
LITTLE JOE

"That's what folks call the road agent who's been holdin' up the Cactus stage," Cap Maxwell explained quietly. "Nobody has ever got a look at his face, 'cause he wears a white hood that comes clear down to his shoulders. Since he's a small, slim hombre who don't talk much, Sheriff Walt Starns started callin' him Little Joe."

His blue eyes squinted thoughtfully, Wayne Morgan stared at the note a long time before he spoke. His interest in the white-hooded bandit was heightened now. The Masked Rider was being suspected for the stage hold-ups, and the Robin Hood outlaw's name had received enough ill-treatment. In addition, "Little Joe" had just taken a hand in the Diamond Cross war and Morgan knew it had not been without reason. Why had the bandit befriended Cap Maxwell? Was it a trick?

"Little Joe must have found better pickin's before he come here and started stealin' Shan Loring's moonstones," Morgan mused. Although Maxwell had told the cowboy about the unfortunate condition of his red-headed partner, Morgan had said nothing of the fight in the badlands. In addition to his other worries, the old rancher seemed sincerely grieved by Loring's failing mind, as if he were partially to blame for that, too. News of Loring's attack on Wayne Morgan would only grieve him more, make him feel it was his duty to apologize for the red-headed giant's behavior.

"I think the gold came from that hombre that lent us a hand last night," Whit Berry declared. "The Masked Rider. I can't see Little Joe helpin' anybody connected with the Weepin' Woman!"

DISAGREEING with this line of speculation, Morgan told the foreman he had always heard the Robin Hood outlaw was more generous with guns and fists than he was with money.

"It seems to me that Little Joe is gettin' gold from somewhere, and the Masked Rider is gettin' the blame!"

Over a warm meal which Cap Maxwell prepared himself in the kitchen at the back of the house, Wayne Morgan encouraged a further exchange of views

about the situation at the Diamond Cross. Already, his mind was working over the facts he had obtained and the diffident, hang-dog expressions of Whit Berry and the old rancher made him eager to start work on the vague suspicions the information had aroused in his agile brain.

Though he had not admitted as much when they were discussing wages, the only reward Wayne Morgan sought here was to ease the mental burdens of these two men whom he had quickly grown to like and admire. His happiness came from giving peace to others, and in thwarting the lawlessness and oppression which constantly sought to choke progress from the great surging frontier that was his first love.

Happiness could never come to the Diamond Cross again until Whit Berry was reunited with Velma Sloan, or had learned her true fate, and Cap Maxwell was left free to clear his honest name of the obstacles which now obscured it. The importance of this task was emphasized every time Wayne Morgan looked at Maxwell's fast-aging face and at the sadness and exhaustion in Whit Berry's gray eyes.

Still pondering the identity of the bandit called Little Joe, Morgan asked the rancher many questions about the various men who had invested money in the Weeping Woman Mine. He was surprised to learn that most of the stockholders had long since left Moonstone Valley, but that Maxwell still mailed them checks whenever he could raise sufficient money. The herd which had been scattered by the fire would have ended his obligation to these men, and the nearness of his goal made the loss doubly infuriating. The rancher had left the cattle untended for a year, allowing them to wander and fatten while he looked forward to the day they would pay him out of debt.

"You mean you hadn't been up to that end of the valley in a year?" Morgan queried, sensing a vague significance in this fact.

Maxwell nodded. "Drove 'em up there and left 'em last summer, long before Grady Sloan and Thad Tate was killed. I never get around that cussed mine unless I have to; never want to look at it and think what a fool I was!"

When the meal was finished, Morgan asked the rancher to assign any chores to him that needed to be done. Maxwell explained that his chief worry was to gather cattle for shipping. He said that Whit Berry had done all he could, and that Morgan could now have a fling at hiring a roundup crew who would be willing to wait for their wages until the ranch was put on paying basis again. Since much of the day was gone, he told Morgan to catch up on odd jobs around the ranch that afternoon. Tomorrow he could ride into Cactus in search for men.

At any other time, Whit Berry might have resented being replaced by a newcomer. But he liked Wayne Morgan, had recognized the strength and ability in the quiet-spoken man, and was sincerely hoping that his presence would change the luck of the Diamond Cross. Besides, Whit Berry's thoughts were not of cattle and ranching now, and had not been for months. Until Velma Sloan was in his arms again, his real interest would be only in searching for her.

Leaving Cap Maxwell pacing restlessly around the house, Morgan walked with Whit Berry toward the bunkhouse. The tall foreman moved with a listless gait, his eyes staring unseeingly at the ground. Knots of muscle played along the square rim of his jaw, and Morgan was aware of his thoughts even before the man spoke.

Berry glanced decisively at the horses in the corral, and then raised his eyes to the green hills beyond.

"I'm ridin' out, Morgan," he said quietly. "With you here to keep tab on the old man, it'll give me a chance to do some lookin'."

"For Velma?"

Berry nodded. "I'm takin' a ride back up into the rocks. That end of the valley is the only place anybody could hide a girl or—or a body this long without it bein' found. I'll be back by midnight."

"What if yuh ain't?" Morgan asked. "Then it won't be my fault."

CONSCIOUS that they both shared the thought that death and danger still bided its time in the region where the fire had started, Morgan met the foreman's steady glance in understanding. No threat to his life could stop Whit Berry's quest, and Morgan would have felt the same in the man's place. As Whit turned toward the corral, Morgan moved on a few

paces to the steps of the bunkhouse where Berry had left his warbag.

As the dark-haired cowboy bent to lift his pack, his glance was focused on the sheltered nook made by the joining of the steps to the wall of the building. The discovery he made then was not entirely accidental, for he had not forgotten that this was where Little Joe had left the pouch of gold for Cap Maxwell.

Leaving the warbag in place, he stooped and picked up the glistening round rock which had caught his eye. It was a moonstone. The clue for which his eyes had been searching since he walked into the yard was now in his hand. This far away from its native ground, the moonstone could have got there in only one way. Little Joe, the bandit, had accidentally dropped it.

After a short debate with himself, Morgan walked to the corral where Whit Berry was saddling a long legged dun horse.

He showed Berry the stone, explained where he had found it, but the foreman showed little interest.

"Anybody that rides up that way usually brings back one or two as a good-luck charm," Berry said nonchalantly as he led his mount outside and stepped into saddle. "Yuh may have somethin' and yuh may not. I don't think you'll find Little Joe with it, and if yuh do it won't help us much. It ain't him that's after Cap Maxwell."

With a wave of his hand, Berry swung the horse around and galloped away. Regardless of its value, the moonstone reminded Morgan of wild-eyed Shan Loring. He started to call to Whit Berry, inform him that the red-headed giant was on the prowl in the badlands and in a dangerous mood. But Whit was already out of hearing, spurring toward the hills.

Glancing again at the opalescent rock, the dark-haired waddy held it close to his eyes then for another inspection. One corner of the stone held a faint golden tinge, as if it had been rubbed against the yellow metal and collected dust in its pores. He was positive that Whit Berry had underestimated the vaue of this rough jewel. As he went on into the bunkhouse, the icy glimmer that many men had seen in the eyes of the Masked Rider had frozen in Wayne Morgan's eyes.

## CHAPTER VIII

### *Manhunt*

BY DUSK Wayne Morgan had done more work than an ordinary forty-a-month puncher would do in a full day. He had forked down enough hay into the barn stalls to last a week, tightened some sagging poles on the far side of the corral, and repaired all the broken harness in the supply room. He was getting a broken-down buckboard in shape to be used as a chuckwagon when Cap Maxwell came out from the house to call him to supper.

Two things had happened during the afternoon to give the old rancher's spirit a needed boost. One of them was Morgan's initiative, for the optimism with which the dark-haired waddy readied things for another roundup reminded Maxwell of happier days. The other was the fact that his Chinese cook, who had left the house when Maxwell went on roundup duty, had returned. Like all other men of the outdoors, Cap Maxwell had a strong prejudice against doing any kind of work inside.

Morgan was washing up at the bunkhouse pump when he heard the thump of running hoofs and turned to find Cap Maxwell beside him, staring curiously into the blue twilight. A rider came into view in the level pasture east of the house and galloped into the ranch yard a few seconds later. The horseman started toward the house, but swerved to the bunkhouse when he saw the two men standing in the shadows there.

The star pinned over the left pocket of the big iron-jawed man's fat-padded wool vest identified him as Sheriff Walt Starns. Wayne Morgan studied him with casual interest, failing to see the type of man he had expected.

Starns was all body and no limbs. His small, egg-shaped head looked as if it had been added to his great hulking torso as an afterthought and rolled around like it might fall off when he talked. His voice, tired after the struggle from his fat-wrinkled neck to his small, thin-lipped mouth, was a hoarse wheeze. To compensate for the shortness of his stubby arms,

the sheriff's two guns were belted high on his broad hips with the butts turned forward. Despite his size, there would be nothing awkward about the way Starns handled those guns, Morgan decided.

"Howdy, Walt," Cap Maxwell said. "On business?"

Walt Starns' reply was delayed by a grinding, rattling cough which he made no attempt to muffle with his hand.

"That's right," he growled at last. "Little Joe pulled another stage raid yesterday about dusk, and made off with two boxes of Shan Loring's stones. Like always he didn't touch the mail or nothin'."

Unconsciously, Cap Maxwell's gnarled right hand slipped into the pocket of his square-tailed black coat. Morgan knew the pouch of gold was there, and Maxwell's expression indicated that he meant to mention the bandit's visit to the Diamond Cross. For reasons of his own, Morgan did not believe it would be a wise move, and he spoke before Maxwell could reply.

"This ain't no camp for outlaws, Sheriff," Morgan said evenly. "That why yuh come?"

The big, pink-faced lawman coughed again, changed the subject long enough to learn Morgan's name. Maxwell introduced the dark-haired cowboy as the Diamond Cross' new *segundo*.

Starns' tiny black eyes swept over Morgan's tall muscular frame without comment, and he did not offer to shake hands.

"Shortly after this here hold-up," Starns went on as if there had been no interruption, "I understand yuh had a little trouble up in one of Moonstone Valley's hollers and the Masked Rider throwed in with yuh. It's my idea that he's either wearin' two disguises and robbin' the stage himself, or he's in cahoots with Little Joe. I'm after that Masked Rider gent, Maxwell, and yuh better talk fast if yuh know where's he's hidin' out at."

Relief showed momentarily in Maxwell's face, and then his flat cheeks glowed with anger and scorn. "Reckon Hobe Venter and Stacy Lipps has drifted into Cactus by now and are shootin' off their mouths. He was too much for them to handle, and I reckon they'd like to see him caught. Or it is Milo Trapp who's pushin' yuh out this way?"

THE chuckle which started in Starns' chest terminated in the habitual grinding cough.

"Huh!" he snorted. "Milo Trapp don't care how many times his stages are robbed as long as it's hurtin' Shan Lorin' and not him. He don't want me to catch Little Joe. He'd rather pore Shan had to go hungry."

"Then why are you doin' it?" Wayne Morgan asked softly.

Walt Starns twisted toward the dark-haired waddy and tried to raise his head to an indignant height on its short neck.

"It's my duty! That's why."

A tight grin pulled at the cowboy's lips. "Seems to me you'd be just as interested in the gents that tried to burn Cap and his cattle alive as yuh would some hombre who stole a few blue rocks. Not to mention a couple of unsolved murders I've heard about and the whereabouts of a young girl who's been missing for months!"

Starns' slitted black eyes tried to bury themselves in rolls of fat as he eyed Morgan with fury.

"You keep out of this, mister, before I lock yuh up as a suspicious character," he snapped. "I don't like the way yuh take up for them owlhooters! I figger when I catch the Masked Rider I'll put an end to the whole she-bang. Any man that'll steal from a pore addle-pated prospector like Shan Loring is a yaller dog in my book."

"And any one who shoots in the back like the one who killed Tate is a yaller dog in mine," Morgan countered. "And speakin' of owlhooters, I might look yuh up tomorrow and talk some more about that. There's a couple gents on this range who interest me."

Starns' pink face grew pinker as his anger continued to leap and burn. He picked up the reins and kneed his horse around to leave.

"Mind yore own business and yuh'll live longer, Morgan," he snarled.

His hacking cough drifted along behind him as he galloped out of the yard with the saddle creaking under his weight.

"Yuh shouldn't have stirred him up that way, son," Cap Maxwell said quietly. "I don't know Starns much. He come here three years ago with money enough to buy the votes that elected him. But I

know he's always suspicious of a gent after he gets riled at him."

Morgan chuckled. "Then we'll be even, Cap. It don't strike me just right the way Starns wants to recover them moonstones."

"I think I can see through that," the rancher ventured. "Milo Trapp owns the stage line, and Starns don't like him. Milo opposed Starns in the sheriff's race. Trapp lost money in our mine, and will admit he'd like to see me and Shan Loring beggin' like hound dogs. He won't get no protection for his drivers, refuses to let the law ride in his coaches. Since Trapp don't want to catch Little Joe it makes Walt Starns try that much harder. But Milo Trapp is a hard man to buck."

"You sound like you've had trouble with Trapp," Morgan guessed.

"I'm havin' it now. When I promised to stand good for every dollar invested in the mine, Milo Trapp wanted it put in writin'. I signed ten thousand dollars worth of notes for him, two thousand in each note. The rest of the stockholders let me pay 'em when I can, but Trapp is after me every time a note is due. There's one due now, and I've been lookin' to hear from him all day. That's why I need a market herd so bad. You'd think a man with as much land and money as he's got would go a little easy."

"That's the kind who always wants more," Morgan declared. The hate and greed of Milo Trapp stirred up new thoughts of suspicion about the Moonstone Valley killer in Morgan's mind.

He followed the old rancher into the house after a while, but they talked little during the meal. Maxwell had not asked about Whit Berry, for the young foreman's absence had become a custom. But Morgan noticed that the rancher looked several times toward the window which faced the dark hills, and the cowboy's thoughts also traveled that way. . . .

In spite of Cap Maxwell's urgent plea that he sleep near him, Wayne Morgan insisted on spending the night at the bunkhouse. He sympathized with the old rancher's desire for companionship and protection, for there seemed to be no end to Maxwell's unrest.

WHEN Morgan left the ranchhouse, Maxwell was sitting in his chair looking glumly at a letter which had arrived at the Diamond Cross shortly after supper. A skinny, bald-headed rider from the Rocking T Ranch had delivered the message. It was from Milo Trapp, and stated that the man would file a lien against the Diamond Cross unless Maxwell paid the note, which was now due, by the next day.

With trouble pressing in on him from all sides, the dark-haired cowboy knew Cap Maxwell's life was becoming almost unbearable. If Morgan was to help the man, he would have to act swiftly, and it was this thought that made him desert the rancher tonight.

In one day at the Diamond Cross, Wayne Morgan had learned much about the persecution the rancher had been forced to endure, but there were still many unanswered questions in his mind. He had sent Blue Hawk to Cactus in the hope of learning more facts, and he was expecting a report from the Yaqui soon. By sleeping in the bunkhouse, Morgan would make it much simpler for them to meet and talk without arousing Maxwell's suspicion.

Morgan had little intention of wasting the entire night in slumber, so he did not enter the long, low-roofed building behind the main house immediately. He sat down on the darkened steps for a while, his gaze fixed thoughtfully on Maxwell's lighted window. While he waited, he could easily imagine the torturing thoughts that were coursing through Maxwell's mind at that moment, could picture him sitting alone in the big house rocking solemnly back and forth in his chair, trying vainly to find a solution to his countless worries.

Morgan's mind was busy, too, but he was viewing Maxwell's plight in a different light. The things he had learned here had completely reversed his original conclusions. He was convinced now that a fear of vengeance had completely blinded Cap Maxwell to the real danger in Moonstone Valley. The mysterious killer who had claimed the lives of Thad Tate and Grady Sloan was playing for greater stakes than the mere satisfaction of avenging the loss of a few dollars invested in a worthless gold mine. Vengeance was swift and decisive, usually governed more by passion than by cleverness.

Such was not the case in this particular

instance. Tate and Sloan had died three months ago near the Weeping Woman Mine. Cap Maxwell and Shan Loring, the other two partners were still alive. The only threat to Maxwell's life had been the fire in the hollow last night, and it had come on the rancher's first visit to the mine's locality. Today, Wayne Morgan had passed near the deserted gold claim and the wild-eyed miner, Shan Loring, had tried to kill him, babbling baseless accusations against the dark-haired cowboy. Was the Weeping Woman Mine an accursed territory, or was there some other reason for the disaster that struck all who came near it?

Morgan was certain that the solution to one mystery in Moonstone Valley would shed light on the others. If he could learn the reason for Little Joe's help to the Diamond Cross, it would also help to identify the white-hooded bandit. With Little Joe's identity established, he might be able to learn why the bandit insisted on stealing Shan Loring's moonstones, and perhaps uncover the leader of the entire plot which was smothering the Diamond Cross with sorrow and unhappiness.

The answer to all these things might eventually leave a clue to the disappearance of Velma Sloan. At least Wayne Morgan was positive that there was a connection between each incident, and that Cap Maxwell and Whit Berry could find no peace here until every circumstance had been pursued and revealed for its true purpose.

Morgan sat on the steps until he saw the light disappear from the ranchhouse living room, and then reappear at the corner window of the adobe building. Cap Maxwell had at last decided to seek refuge from his burdens by sleep, and as the man started moving around the bedroom, Morgan arose and entered the dark bunkhouse. There was yet no sign of Blue Hawk, and he decided to stretch out and get some rest before the Yaqui arrived. But, as he had already surmised, there was to be no rest for Wayne Morgan tonight.

HE HAD just turned his back when a shot came. The first sound was the whistle of the slug and the tinkle of falling glass, and then came the flat slap of an exploding rifle. It took Morgan a moment to realize that the bullet had not entered the bunkhouse, and then he heard Cap Maxwell's startled yell.

Whirling, Morgan leaped past the steps and landed with legs widespread in the dirt of the yard. The two black Colts had leaped to his hands while he was still in the air, and now he swung a piercing glance around the shadow-tinted ranch buildings. A glance showed him the broken window in Cap Maxwell's bedroom. The light was still burning, the drawn shade swaying slightly from the feathery breeze that was part of Arizona nights. He saw Cap Maxwell's short, stocky silhouette move across the room, and then the old rancher wisely put out the light.

Relieved to see the rancher still on his feet, Morgan made no move toward the house. Instead, he stayed intently still, his gaze sweeping every corner of the yard, his thumbs holding the cocked hammers of his twin guns. Suddenly, a shadow moved out from a chokeberry shrub thirty yards away and crept toward the gloomy base of a thick-limbed aspen where Morgan knew a horse would be waiting.

It was the sight Morgan had hoped to see. Holding his fire, the dark-haired waddy sprinted rapidly forward, running as quietly as possible to shorten the range. He had traveled less than ten yards when the rifleman saw him coming, and broke into a run toward the aspen. Morgan knew he would never reach the horse in time to stop the drygulcher, but he was close enough for an accurate shot.

Stopping for a steady aim, Morgan released the cocked hammer of his right-hand gun. A scarlet streak leaped through the night, shooting straight toward the extended right leg of the running man. It was a spot Morgan had chosen deliberately, for he wanted to stop the man without killing him. At first he thought he was successful. Just as the cowboy had expected, the leg buckled and the man went down. With a bullet through his calf, no ordinary man was going to get up and run again. But the drygulcher was no ordinary man. He was hardly on the ground before he was up again, moving with as much speed and determination as before.

For a second the shadow of the aspen swallowed him, and Morgan's next two shots clipped twigs and leaves from the

dark tree. Then presently the drum of running hoofs signified the rifleman's swift departure, and Morgan knew pursuit would be useless by the time he roped and saddled his own horse.

He turned back toward the house in deeper sympathy with Cap Maxwell because of the incredible happenings that had brought fear into the old man's life. For Wayne Morgan had just shot a man through the leg; he could not miss at that distance, and he had seen the man fall. Still the rifleman had leaped up and run on without so much as a limp!

"Did yuh get him, Morgan?" Cap Maxwell ran across the yard, his gray-streaked brown hair tousled and his unbuttoned clothes flapping with his stiff-gaited trot.

MORGAN shook his head, noticing that Maxwell had escaped unharmed. "Missed him clean, Cap. But I'll never know how come!"

Maxwell stuffed his shirt-tail into his moleskin pants and stared uneasily in the direction the rifleman had taken.

"Hard shootin' on a night dark as this. I'm shore glad I hired yuh, Morgan. Looks like they're still after me."

The dark-haired cowboy nodded, glancing thoughtfully at the plain white envelope which protruded from Maxwell's shirt pocket. He recognized it as the letter the rancher had received right after supper that night, and it started a new thought through his groping mind.

"Milo Trapp ever try to buy yuh out here, Cap?"

"Shore," Maxwell replied. "Ever since things started gettin' so hard for me, Milo's been offerin' to give me a few thousand for the Diamond Cross, tear up his notes and pay off the mortgage and call it even. That's one reason he pushes me on them notes so hard. He figgers I'll finally give up."

"That's what I thought," Morgan said softly.

"Saints alive, Morgan! Yuh don't think it's Milo Trapp behind this thing?"

Turning, Morgan started walking back toward the house with the ranch owner, shaking his head dubiously. "I have an idee it could be a lot of folks, Cap. Yuh admit Trapp didn't like it 'cause he lost his money, even if yuh are tryin' to pay him back. Then there's yore own foreman, Whit Berry. He stays gone a lot, and ain't no way of knowin' exactly what he's doin'. Even Velma Sloan could be layin' low and callin' the play. Only thing, she wouldn't kill her own father. I'm remainin' suspicious of a lot of folks, Cap, until I tag the real killer! And I'm shore hankerin' to meet this Milo Trapp gent in person. That shot wasn't aimed to hit you. It went through the upper half of the window, and any man wantin' to kill would have aimed to the lower sash. It was meant to scare you, Cap—mebbe scare yuh enough to sell the Diamond Cross."

"Well, you'll get a chance to meet Trapp tomorrow, I reckon. I've figured out a way to pay him that note. Use the gold that Little Joe left me. Trick or no trick, I've got to do it. I aim to let you take it in to Trapp."

After promising Maxwell that he would remain alert for any more prowlers, Morgan urged the old man to return to the house and go to bed. The rancher was not eager to follow the suggestion, but the quiet, determined way in which Morgan planted himself again on the bunkhouse steps, his worn Colt in his lap, gave the man courage and he soon relented. But it was nearly an hour before Morgan noticed that the light was out and all was still at the house.

Apparently, Wayne Morgan was not the only person who had been watching the Diamond Cross headquarters for an indication of sleep, for it was not long after the place was still before the keen wail of a mountain lion drifted down from the round knoll a short distance behind the barn. Walking swiftly that way, the cowboy stopped in the shadows, cupped his hands to his mouth, and imitated the signal. His voice was muted in such a way as to make it sound too distant to arouse Cap Maxwell, but sensitive ears received the answer.

In less than ten minutes Blue Hawk, the Yaqui Indian, was drifting out of the darkness on moccasined feet and coming hurriedly toward the barn.

NEXT ISSUE

RETRIBUTION RANGE

*A Masked Rider Novel*

By GUNNISON STEELE

## CHAPTER IX

### *Owlhoot Haven*

OFTEN Blue Hawk's keen eyes could probe deeply into men's thoughts and a look at Wayne Morgan's set face brought a scowl to the Indian's bronzed features.

"There has been trouble here, Senor," Blue Hawk said quietly as he slipped up beside the cowboy.

Morgan nodded. They hunkered down close to the protecting walls of the round-roofed barn and talked in low tones for several minutes. Morgan told the Indian all that he had learned in a day at the Diamond Cross, and Blue Hawk listened closely so that he, too, could ponder the answers to the mysterious happenings in Moonstone Valley. The small blue bruise on Morgan's jaw caught the Yaqui's attention, and he quickly inquired about it.

"The loco one, Shan Loring, put that there," Morgan replied, explaining about the fight in the badlands.

Blue Hawk glanced speculatively toward the hills. "Perhaps his twisted sight will also see Whit Berry as a killer. You said the foreman planned to return at midnight. It is past that hour, Senor, and Whit Berry is not near. And there is no time for you to search for him. I think you will want to ride elsewhere."

As Morgan frowned questioningly, Blue Hawk told him hurriedly of the things he had learned in Cactus that day. Like the Masked Rider, Blue Hawk was also adept at the art of disguise. When seeking information, the Yaqui often appeared in town with an old blanket draped across his shoulders and a floppy sombrero pulled low over his face. In this way he appeared as any wandering redskin, and could move about without being suspected as the intelligent accomplice of the Robin Hood outlaw.

Blue Hawk had spent the entire day in the little settlement of Cactus, moving from one shaded awning to another and keeping his ear tuned inconspicuously to several conversations. Remembering the Masked Rider's suspicions about Hobe Venter and Stacy Lipps, the Yaqui had ambled by the jail several times to study the reward dodgers which usually dotted the walls of any frontier sheriff's office. It was then that he made a startling discovery. Nowhere in the town of Cactus was there a single reward poster!

Knowing that new advertisements for "wanted" men were often mailed out on the first of the month, Blue Hawk had remained close to Sheriff Walt Starns' office when the day's mail was delivered. Shortly afterward he found the answer to the peculiar absence of bounty offers in Cactus.

"Senor Starns went into the alley with much useless mail to burn," Blue Hawk explained. "I remained hidden behind a rain barrel while he lighted the papers with a match and walked away. There was time for me to salvage one poster from the fire, Senor," Blue Hawk concluded.

From the pocket of his cavalry shirt, the Indian took a scorched piece of paper and handed it to the dark-haired cowboy. The edges were ragged and brown-stained, but there was enough of it left for Morgan to realize the value of Blue Hawk's work. For, staring out at him from the tattered parchment was the square, heavy-browed face of Hobe Venter! There was sufficient printed matter left intact on the poster to reveal that Hobe Venter was worth one thousand dollars to the man who turned him over to the proper authorities.

"That's a strange thing," Morgan mused. "A sheriff overlookin' a man wanted for murder. No honest lawman is goin' to do that. And there were other posters that were burned, Hawk. That means Walt Starns is protectin' more than one outlaw for some reason. Instead of one man bein' after the Weepin' Woman Mine owners, there must be a whole gang. And I got a hunch I know who's behind it!"

"Perhaps," Blue Hawk ventured, "he overlooks the record because he needs Venter's help. The sheriff has hired Venter and Stacy Lipps to go with the midnight stage from Cactus. They have arranged a trap for Little Joe, and they mean to kill the bandit without a chance to surrender."

MORGAN understood now why Blue Hawk had said there would be no time to search for Whit Berry. Since he had found the moonstone by the bunkhouse steps, he had become convinced that

the white-hooded bandit would be of valuable assistance in solving the mystery which had started a reign of terror in Moonstone Valley. The bandit could be no help dead, and Morgan did not mean to let him be killed without a chance to defend himself. Remembering the help offered Cap Maxwell by the road-agent, Morgan made a quick decision.

"I don't think there'll be any more trouble here before daylight, Hawk," Morgan said hurriedly. "You head into the badlands and see if yuh can find out what happened to Whit Berry. I don't want anything to happen to Little Joe until I get a chance to talk with that bandit."

Questioning Blue Hawk until he had every detail of the ambush planned by Hobe Venter and Stacy Lipps, Morgan hastily saddled the hammerhead roan and led it out of the yard so Cap Maxwell would not hear him leave.

"You will have to hurry, Senor," Blue Hawk warned as he moved back toward his waiting horse. "The stage has already left Cactus with a load of Shan Loring's moonstones, and the sheriff thinks Little Joe will stop it in the cut where the trail crosses the rim of the valley. It has been held up there before."

His heart beating faster with the anticipation of action, Wayne Morgan waved to the Yaqui and rolled his blunted spurs over the roan's flanks. The speedy horse stretched immediately into a long gallop and Morgan was across the level prairie by the time Blue Hawk turned toward the arid wastes of Moonstone Valley.

As soon as he was in the hills, the dark-haired cowboy swung southeast to cut into the stage road where it curved close toward the Diamond Cross range before climbing out of the valley in the direction of Phoenix and other distant terminals.

Blue Hawk's report had verified Cap Maxwell's explanation of the strange antagonism between Milo Trapp, owner of the stage line, and Sheriff Walt Starns. Though Trapp continued to refuse an armed guard with his coaches, Sheriff Starns had finally hit upon a way to have his men on the scene when Little Joe appeared.

While the stage was still in the barn, Lipps and Venter were to hide under the tarpaulin which covered the baggage rack on top of the vehicle. Since few passengers rode the midnight trip, and Shan Loring's moonstones had been stored there earlier, there was little chance of the concealed men being discovered when the stage left Cactus. It was a clever plan, sure death for Little Joe!

Within an hour, Morgan came out of the brushy undergrowth and spurred the roan up a bare, rocky knoll that formed one of the stepping stones to the rim of Moonstone Valley. He pulled up on the crest of the hill to give his lathered mount a rest, and then he saw there was not time for deliberation. Directly below him was the slow-moving hulk of the Cactus stage.

The rocking vehicle had already started its ascent around the hillside beyond, and Morgan could make out the notched gap a hundred yards ahead where the narrow wagon road passed between two rock walls which had been cut down to lower the sharp grade over the mountains.

Shifting the twin holsters forward to a more convenient position, Morgan urged the roan forward again. He came off the hill at a reckless gallop, leaning low in the saddle while the wind whipped the brim of his Stetson away from his rugged brown face. Like a thundering avalanche, he pounded down into the hollow between the two ridges and sent the roan scraping and pawing its way up the slope toward the slanting stage road. Fast as he had traveled, the dark-haired cowboy barely made it in time.

A shot thundered with startling echoes from the dark stillness of the cut just as Wayne Morgan reached the trail fifty feet behind the moving stage. He kept going, spurring in closer as the scrawny, meek-faced jehu hauled back on the reins and stopped the skittish horses. Milo Trapp had chosen his man well. The bearded driver made no move to resist, and Morgan could hear him chattering nervously to some unseen person.

THEN Morgan was close enough to see around the curve to the front of the coach. Silently, he brought the tired roan to a halt and sat tensely in the saddle as he got his first look at Little Joe.

A lithe, wasp-waisted figure had appeared in the trail directly in front of the stage, seated gracefully in the saddle of a spirited mustang. The only part of the bandit's dress which Morgan could see

clearly was the worn cowboy levis rolled above small, tooled riding boots. Over Little Joe's head and shoulders flowed a white hood of some finely-woven material that had a faint sheen despite the darkness. The lower edge of the hood was frayed and uneven, as if a seam had been ripped there or some trimming removed. The rifle, still curling smoke from its blued barrel, was aimed at the bearded driver's chest, and the bandit made a silent gesture with its threatening bore.

"I-I know what yuh want, Little Joe," the driver stammered. "The—the moonstones ore on top. I'll have to get 'em for yuh. There—there ain't no use to get reckless, 'cause Milo Trapp don't care how much yuh steal from Shan—"

"Look out, Little Joe! It's a trap!" Wayne Morgan had taken his eyes away from the bandit just in time to see the movement of the rumpled canvas on top of the coach. His cry of warning rose above the driver's stammering surrender, changing his whining tones into a howl of terrified surprise.

As he called out loudly, Morgan was already on the move. For the burly, sloping shoulders of Hobe Venter had slipped into view, and Stacy Lipps was shoving up beside him. Both men were swinging cocked rifles toward the front of the coach when Wayne Morgan's roan reached the rear of the vehicle.

Yelling to attract the men's attention, Morgan left the saddle in a springing leap. Before Venter and Lipps could collect their wits, the husky cowboy had caught hold of the baggage railing and swung up beside them.

The gunmen forgot Little Joe as they gawked in surprise at the grim-faced stranger who had come from nowhere and was lunging angrily toward them. Hobe Venter got out a strangled curse, tried to swing the rifle around to fire. The gun exploded, but it was too close and crowded for long guns now, and the slug burrowed harmlessly through the ceiling of the empty coach. Morgan did not give the man time to fire again. His right fist was already on its way, and the crack of it against Venter's chin seemed a part of the gunshot.

The burly outlaw toppled back on the narrow footing, bumping into stringy Stacy Lipps and staggering him. Alert to every advantage, Wayne Morgan centered his attention on Lipps. Venter was down, and Lipps was already overbalanced. Like twin pistons, Morgan's arms pumped back and forth. He hit Lipps first in the middle, and then on the point of his slim chin. The stringy gunman was hardly in the fight before he was out of it. Morgan's second blow lifted him over the edge of the baggage rack and flung him outward into space. He landed with a solid thump on the rocky trail, and lay still as the fall knocked the wind out of him.

Lipps' swift defeat left more room on top of the rocking stage, and Hobe Venter used the space to launch a dive at Wayne Morgan's braced legs. The burly man's hunched shoulders smacked into the cowboy like a thrown spear as Venter reared up from the baggage rack. Morgan staggered, tried to catch his balance; but Venter's weight was too much for him. He fell hard, his shoulders hanging over the side of the stage coach as Venter piled on top of him. The gunman's boots scraped noisily as he tried to shove Morgan to the ground, but the cowboy grabbed the ribbed floor of the rack and held on.

STAYING out of Morgan's reach, Venter jabbed his elbow into the cowboy's ribs, trying for a knockout blow. As sharp pain knifed into his lungs, Morgan squirmed aside and rocked over on his back. Venter dived again then, his taloned fingers hunting for the cowboy's throat. That move proved to be Venter's own mistake. Morgan's upraised feet caught Venter just above his crossed gunbelts. The burly outlaw completed his dive, but in a different way. As Morgan straightened his legs in a springy, heaving motion, Venter slid over the cowboy's head and went tumbling down the slope behind the stage.

Straightening, Morgan leaped to the ground beside the man. Venter got up slow and then went down fast, his nose spurting blood as the cowboy's fist smashed him to the rutted trail.

Breathing hard, Morgan picked up the trailing reins of his waiting horse and walked back to the front of the coach. The short, scrawny driver was squatted down in the wagon boot, peering cautiously back toward the sprawled figures of Hobe Venter and Stacy Lipps. There was no sign of the hooded bandit and the gloomy

cut was oddly silent in contrast to the booming shots and scuffling feet of a few minutes before.

"Where's Little Joe?" Morgan asked between breaths. "He get what he come for?"

The jehu stood up and rubbed a grimy bandana over his perspiring face. "He high-tailed soon as the fight started. Didn't say another word. Just turned and skeedaddled. Honest, mister, I didn't know them two hombres was up there. If Milo Trapp knowed they stowed away on one his coaches, he'd raise Cain!"

"Forget it," Morgan cut in, amused by the driver's excuse for the lack of the bandit's success. "I ain't one of Little Joe's pards. Fact is, I aim to try to pick up his trail and bring him in!"

## CHAPTER X

### *The Weeping Woman*

WHILE the unnerved stage driver continued to mumble about the hooded bandit and his own misfortunes, Wayne Morgan swung back to the top of the stalled coach. Two small wooden boxes were lashed to the forward section of the baggage rack, both addressed to a Mr. Arthur Lee, in Kansas City.

Knowing they held Shan Loring's moonstone shipment, the dark-haired cowboy quickly ripped the top from one of the crates. Ignoring the curious glances from the bearded jehu, he dug down inside the box and withdraw several small canvas pouches. He opened them one at a time, running his hand experimentally over the inside of each bag. Shan Loring's shipment was just as it appeared on the address label. The wooden crates contained nothing but the round, shiny flat rocks like those carried by the redhead when the Masked Rider had met him during the stampede.

Disappointment showed briefly in the cowboy's face as he slid back to the ground and mounted the hammerhead roan. Then he glanced at the driver's disgruntled face and chuckled softly before he whirled and rode away.

Working his way to the rim of the valley, Morgan had no trouble in picking up Little Joe's trail. Even in the darkness he could see an occasional scarred rock or broken bush, for the bandit's retreat had been too swift to be deceptive. Travel was less difficult on the higher levels, and Morgan kept the roan in a steady jog as he worked northward, stopping now and then to check his course for new sign.

Little Joe had followed a worn path through the brush and rocks, but after riding steadily for over an hour Morgan realized the worst was yet to come. The trail dipped abruptly down over a sloping rock shelf and entered the protective badlands near the Weeping Woman Mine.

Under the pale light of a few scattered stars, Moonstone Valley looked even more impassable than in daylight. A thousand black shadows crawled and twisted over its floor, marking the depths of gulches and canyons where the stars did not penetrate. Here and there a smooth granite spire or eroded rock turret jutted above the unlighted blackness, looming like headstones in a graveyard.

Giving up all attempt at following sign, the cowboy edged the roan down the steep ledge and hurried through a narrow arroyo that led him out into a wider gulch. A hundred yards away he could discern the conical piles of waste ore that had been dug from the deserted gold mine, and he knew the tunnel was only a few steps from those rocks. Off to his right was a lone cottonwood tree, and a few scattered bushes waved dark branches around its base where Nugget Creek flowed briefly through the wasteland.

Morgan stopped the roan and stared thoughtfully at the creek for while, his senses tuned for any sound or sight that would put him on Little Joe's trail again. But all was quiet around the Weeping Woman Mine.

Then suddenly the stillness was shattered by the high, thin wail of a mountain lion. Morgan was instantly alert, remembering that Blue Hawk had ridden into this same territory in search of Whit Berry. Reining the roan southward, Morgan rode swiftly toward the source of the sound.

Blue Hawk appeared soundlessly from the shadow of an upthrust slab of rock. The Yaqui was on foot, leading the gray quietly behind him. It took Morgan only

a second to see the reason for Blue Hawk's choice. Whit Berry was in the gray's saddle, his lanky body draped face downward across the horse. The tall foreman's hat was gone, and his head was wrapped in the yellow neckerchief the man had worn when he left the Diamond Cross.

"There is death in Moonstone Valley tonight, Senor," Blue Hawk said seriously as he came close to the mounted cowboy.

"You mean Whit is dead?"

"No, Senor. He was lucky. I found him unconscious near the creek. A rifle bullet has grazed his skull, and the killer was still guarding his body, waiting for anyone who came for him."

THE Yaqui touched the ripped shoulder of his blue shirt, and Morgan could see the shallow bullet burn against Blue Hawk's tawny skin.

"The rifleman is hidden high in the rocks," Blue Hawk continued. "When I crept down to get the foreman, the rifleman fired two shots at me. I did not take time to fight with him, because I feared Senor Berry needed a doctor. I was taking him to Cactus when I saw you on the rim."

"*Bueno*, Hawk," Morgan replied. "Get him on to town and then hide out there yourself. I'm goin' to take a look around here and then go back to the ranch. Unless somethin' happens, I'll see you in Cactus in the mornin'."

He told Blue Hawk of his meeting with Little Joe and asked the Yaqui if he had seen the bandit enter the badlands.

"Once I thought I heard the sound of shod hoofs near here," the Yaqui answered, "but I was busy getting out of the rifleman's range and did not investigate."

After Blue Hawk had cut toward the valley rim to take a short-cut to the cowtown of Cactus, Morgan turned back toward the mine. He rode with more caution now, the picture of Whit Berry's wan face still fresh in his mind. The young foreman did not appear to be mortally injured, but it was no fault of the drygulcher. The hidden rifleman had aimed at Berry's brain, probably thought he had been successful in his attempt to kill.

When he came back to the gulch, the cowboy paused a moment in indecision, debating which route to follow. Since he had seen the bandit face to face, Morgan was more eager than ever to talk with Little Joe. He still had in his pocket the moonstone dropped by the bandit in front of the bunkhouse, and he took it out and looked at it again. The faint golden tinge on one edge of the stone was still visible, and it was one of the things Morgan wanted the bandit to explain. He already had an idea how the gold had lodged there, but the bandit's word could turn Morgan's suspicions into definite proof. The moonstones he had seen atop the stagecoach shortly before had no such coloring.

Morgan was not risking his life in the menacing rocks for the mere satisfaction of curiosity, for he was not greatly interested in Shan Loring's loss. His chief thoughts were of an old gray-haired man at the Diamond Cross and the nightmarish worries which haunted that man's life. Somewhere in Moonstone Valley a merciless killer who had claimed the lives of two former partners of the Weeping Woman Mine still ran free.

Morgan was almost certain that he could identify that man now, but the proof against him would be so shallow that he might easily escape justice. Little Joe could greatly strengthen that proof, and provide the answer to another mystery as well, for Morgan now suspected the identity of the white-hooded bandit.

The cowboy's wandering thoughts were abruptly shifted by the metallic ring of an animal's shod hoof. The sound came from his left, and the dark-haired waddy whirled quickly toward cover. Drawing his righthand Colt, Morgan slid quietly to the ground and led his horse into the thick shadows cast by a nearby clump of saguaro cactus. The sound came nearer as Morgan hunkered low behind the giant thorny plants and peered tensely ahead.

A moment later he frowned in surprise as Shan Loring appeared around a turn and walked on past the cactus clump toward the deserted Weeping Woman Mine. The towering, wide-shouldered redhead was leading two pack mules behind him, empty surcingles dangling loosely around the wiry bodies of the animals.

Loring was moving in a steady, purposeful stride, only his stringy red beard visible below the shadow of a flopping black sombrero. Morgan remained hidden until the giant miner was almost to the

creek. Then the cowboy left the roan near the cactus and moved out behind Loring.

SKIPPING from rock to rock, Morgan followed stealthily in the miner's tracks until Loring reached the creek. There the man stopped long enough to water the mules, and then he turned up the rock-strewn slope below the drift mouth of the Weeping Woman Mine. The watching cowboy did not move until the redhead had passed out of sight again.

With curiosity urging him on, Morgan ran swiftly up the slope, dropping cautiously to the ground as he reached the rough wagon road that had been graded along the front of the tunnel. When he was certain that Loring was not near, he stood up and hurried on.

A shiver of foreboding ran down his spine as he glanced at the entrance to the ill-fated mine. Heavy, sun-whitened timbers blocked the entrance now, the seal placed there by Cap Maxwell and his partners the day they admitted defeat in the mining venture. Shan Loring was not in sight, but Morgan was positive he had not entered the deserted tunnel. A look at the timbers was enough to reveal they had not been disturbed since the day they were put there.

It took Morgan only a few minutes to find the miner's trail again. In the soft soil of the graded road which had been built in the hope of freighting out rich ore to Cactus for shipment, Morgan soon picked out the faint impressions left by the tiny mule shoes.

Following the tracks eastward toward the valley rim, Morgan had gone less than a hundred yards when he again spied the hulking shadow of Shan Loring. The giant redhead was below him now, having left the wagon road and entered a narrow gulley that split the corner of the slope. There was more vegetation on this side of the slope, and Morgan had no trouble shortening the distance to his quarry.

He was twenty yards from Shan Loring when the man disappeared. The cowboy had stopped to let the miner get a safe distance away when Shan Loring suddenly faded from sight after walking into the shadows of a chokeberry thicket.

Refusing to believe his eyes, the cowboy stretched out on the dark ground and continued to gaze at the thicket. While he waited the eeriness of the land about him was sharply impressed on his mind.

A hundred feet above him was the deserted, boarded-up mine which had claimed the fortunes and lives of men. Somewhere nearby was a road-agent who hid behind a renovated white hood and consistently stole shipments of the blue-white mineral stones that nature had scattered around the granite ledges of the valley.

Still stalking the shrouding shadows was a vigilant rifleman who had tried to kill Whit Berry and had burned a painful groove along Blue Hawk's left shoulder. And twenty yards in front of Wayne Morgan a bearded, wild-eyed prospector had faded into thin air. In addition to all this, the cowboy could not forget that he had shot a man in the leg tonight and the man had still been able to run, as if the deadly burn of a slug could do him no harm!

Though he could not keep such disconcerting memories completely stifled, Morgan still clung staunchly to practical thoughts. He did not believe in ghosts, and there was no room in his mind for superstition. Everything that had happened in Moonstone Valley had happened for a reason. Some motive greater than vengeance had been responsible for the death of Thad Tate and Grady Sloan, and Cap Maxwell's persecution had the same basis. Stemming from this same disaster, Morgan believed, was the disappearance of Velma Sloan. Even Little Joe, the bandit, had accepted a role in the Weeping Woman Mine drama, and Morgan was positive the road-agent had a vital part in the scheme which the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk had uncovered here.

Morgan's faith in logic was reaffirmed presently, for Shan Loring parted the thick shrubs and came back into view. He had been gone about fifteen minutes, and now the two mules which he led back up the slope were loaded. Each of them had two small wooden crates roped on its back. Shan Loring's midnight journey through Moonstone Valley had apparently been made to prepare another shipment of moonstones.

AFTER the big miner had disappeared from sight above the crest of the gulley, Morgan left his hiding place and

walked quietly to the thicket where Loring had disappeared. He holstered his drawn gun and chuckled quietly when he saw the gaping mouth of a cave beyond the thick shrubs. Shan Loring had come and gone without suspecting that his moonstone cache had been revealed to Wayne Morgan.

His eyes lighting with suspicion, the cowboy started toward the opening. Then he stopped, his head cocked in a listening attitude. There were other sounds in Moonstone Valley now, and he could not tell whether they came from the distance or from the depths of the cave. But he was still aware that an unseen rifleman was nearby, and that he could very easily have plenty of help. The numerous reward posters burned by Sheriff Walt Starns indicated that more than one owlhooter had found refuge in the badlands.

Satisfied with what he had already learned, Morgan turned away and hurried back in the direction of his horse. He knew now how Little Joe obtained advance information about the moonstone shipments. Morgan had trailed the bandit into this area, and Little Joe probably paid close attention to Shan Loring's movements. The big miner was on his way to town now with a new load of moonstones and there would be another hold-up attempt on the first stage out. The next time, Morgan decided, it would be the Masked Rider who intercepted the white-hooded bandit.

A few minutes later the dark-haired cowboy found his horse just as he had left him, and swung wearily into saddle. There would be time for little sleep before he rode into Cactus tomorrow to pay in gold the note Milo Trapp was using as a new bankrupt threat against Cap Maxwell.

## CHAPTER XI

### *The Bullet Hole*

MID-AFTERNOON had arrived when Wayne Morgan rode into Cactus the next day. Lolling lazily in the saddle of the rested roan, the tall dark-haired cowboy looked as indolent and carefree as he had when he first arrived at the Diamond Cross Ranch. But behind the cowboy's calm exterior there was keen calculation. A showdown with the Moonstone Valley killer was near, and Morgan needed to clear only one puzzling obstacle from his path before he made a play that would force the guilty man into the open. That obstacle was Milo Trapp.

Without asking any questions about his evident fatigue, Cap Maxwell had allowed Wayne Morgan to sleep undisturbed in the bunkhouse until noon. The old rancher thought Morgan's weariness was a result of standing guard in the ranchyard all night for he had not heard the dark-haired waddy leave the ranch nor had he seen him return from the badlands at dawn.

Maxwell might have allowed Morgan to sleep longer had not Whit Berry come riding into the ranch still weak and wan from the bullet wound in his head. The young foreman had received medical attention in Cactus, and had insisted on returning to the Diamond Cross when he found he was able to ride.

Berry's arrival aroused new excitement in the old rancher, and Maxwell hastened to awaken Wayne Morgan to hear the foreman's story. Whit Berry told of his rescue by the Masked Rider's Indian pard, and then explained how he had been hurt.

In his exploration of the badlands, Berry had seen a band of strange horsemen threading their way through the rocks near the Weeping Woman Mine. Thinking they might lead him to Velma Sloan, the young foreman had trailed them at a safe distance. He had lost sight of them for a few minutes, and then a rifle barked its deadly message from a nest of rocks in front of him. Afterward, Berry had remembered nothing until he regained consciousness on the outskirts of Cactus with Blue Hawk riding in the saddle behind him.

Cap Maxwell was both angered and encouraged by Whit Berry's report. The old rancher took a measure of hope from the knowledge that the Masked Rider was still in Moonstone Valley, but he was furious over the drygulch attempt on his foreman. Maxwell had insisted on looking up Sheriff Walt Starns and demanding that something be done about the threat of death that continued to hang over his ranch and all who worked for him. It had

taken Morgan nearly an hour to persuade the old rancher to remain at home. He finally won the argument after hinting that the Masked Rider was evidently still working to uncover the plot, pointing out that any rash move by the rancher might interfere with the Robin Hood rider's plans.

Wayne Morgan came into the twisting narrow street of Cactus from the east, his hat brim pulled low against the sun's burning rays. It was a small place, looking more like a temporary camp than a town. A dozen small, flat-roofed wooden shacks clustered at each end of the single street which curved in the middle to avoid two huge black boulders that sat boldly upright like a part of the town and dwarfed the puny structures beside them.

Farther on was the log-walled saloon, and across the street was a general store made of sun-dried adobe bricks. At the western end of the dusty thoroughfare, next door to a ramshackle livery barn, was another adobe building. The bars over the narrow windows identified it as the jail.

It was a town to which a man came to buy food or a drink and for nothing else. There were few horses at the weathered rails, and Morgan could see only one person in sight, a bearded oldster leaning beside the livery barn and whittling idly on a scrap of wood.

As Morgan pulled in at the saloon and stepped to the ground, he let his eyes rove over the faded signs on various windows and was undecided as to where he should look for Milo Trapp. The dim red letters on the livery barn said, TRAPP'S STAGE & FREIGHT LINE. There was also Trapp's Store, Trapp's Bar, and Trapp's Lunch. Morgan wondered how the town had managed to keep the name of Cactus amid such a pretentious display of ownership.

MAKING a guess, Morgan left the reins dangling and crossed to the adobe store building. As soon as he had adjusted his eyes to the gloom of the building's interior, the cowboy knew he had come to the right place.

He had heard enough about Milo Trapp to know him at first glance. Still in his early thirties, Trapp had stepped into one of the richest inheritances in the territory. His father had died five years before, and Milo Trapp had come home from a lifetime of wandering to claim the spoils of the old man's long toil. His original heritage had been the Rocking T Ranch and the stage line, but Milo Trapp's ambition and desire for power and influence had rapidly enlarged his holdings. He owned the three other spreads that bordered Cap Maxwell's Diamond Cross, and his only failure had been in the Weeping Woman Mine. Trapp's determination for unblemished success made the loss difficult to forget.

The man who came out from behind a scarred counter to meet Wayne Morgan was dark-skinned and well-made. His deep black eyes were set under thin jet-black brows, his straight, prominent nose giving them the wide division that goes with intelligence. The stiff, erect bearing of his wide shoulders told of military training, and the dented scar left by a Sioux arrow puckered the man's left cheek. Until his father had died, Milo Trapp had spent his entire manhood in army service, and the mark of many battle campaigns was on his scarred, thick-fingered hands.

"You Milo Trapp?" Morgan asked quietly.

"You are correct, sir," Milo Trapp replied. His words were slow and precise, and his tight lower lip curled at one corner when he talked.

Morgan dug the heavy canvas pouch from his overall pocket, his eyes studying Milo Trapp from under the low brim of his Stetson. He let his glance drop to the man's polished boots, wondering if Trapp had scars that were more recent than the one left by the Sioux arrow. There was a small tear in the right leg of the man's serge trousers, marring his otherwise immaculate dress. The hole did not flare open, and was little more than a rough spot on the smooth material, such as a moth might leave.

His pale blue eyes glimmering strangely, Morgan held out the canvas bag. "You got a note against the Diamond Cross. This is to take care of it."

Milo Trapp looked surprised. He frowned and showed indecision, turned and walked behind the counter that stretched across the rear of the building. There was no activity in Cactus at this time of day, and Morgan saw only one

other person in the store. The skinny, bald-headed puncher who had delivered Trapp's message to the ranch lounged against the far end of the counter, almost out of sight in the shadows.

Leaning against the cluttered display rack, Morgan waited for the soldierly merchant to weigh the gold. Trapp took the pouch from the balances, ran his fingers through gleaming yellow shavings inside, and his black eyes lifted dubiously to the cowboy's face.

"Anything wrong, mister?" Morgan asked softly. He had sensed a change in Trapp's manner the moment the man learned his business.

Trapp seemed to be thinking hard, and his eyes were shadowed with poorly-veiled disappintment.

"The gold weighs out," Trapp said evenly. "But I can't take it. I don't know where it came from, or why you are paying it. This is between Cap Maxwell and myself. I've already taken out papers to force an auction at the Diamond Cross."

Wayne Morgan took a quick step forward, placing his hands palms down on the counter in front of Milo Trapp. Anger tightened the muscles along his lean jaw, making him look younger, ruggedly handsome.

"You're paid, mister, and that's the way it is." Morgan's voice was slow and soft, but his words were forceful when he introduced himself and told of his affiliation with the Diamond Cross Ranch. "Everybody wants to kick a man when he's down, and Cap Maxwell has had his part of it. From now on when yuh want to kick somebody, Trapp, kick me! Yuh'll get kicked back!"

THE scar on Milo Trapp's face turned white and ugly as the blood drained out of his dark skin. His lips curled as a harsh reply rolled up from his throat, but he stifled the words and relaxed. A sly gleam spread through his hard eyes, and he grinned crookedly at the cowboy.

"All right, Morgan," he said with a chuckle. "We'll let it rest that way. Anything else I can do for you?"

"I'll take a receipt for that gold," Morgan said, still leaning on the counter with his face thrust close to the soldierly man's dark cheek.

"You won't get it," Trapp said flatly. "You won't get it and you might as well go."

Morgan had sensed the trick a moment before. Milo Trapp had not wanted to be paid, and he had tried to bluff Wayne Morgan away until legal action could be taken against Cap Maxwell. He had surrendered his bluff and resorted to cunning. Trapp had the gold and Morgan had no receipt. So far as Milo Trapp was concerned there had been no settlement made, and Cap Maxwell would have nothing left with which to pay.

"Trapp," Morgan said grimly, "you got mighty pretty teeth. Unless yuh write me out a receipt in ten seconds, you're goin' to be walkin' around town holdin' 'em in yore hand and tellin' folks that Wayne Morgan knocked 'em out!"

The dark-haired cowboy tightened his grip on the barrier before him, tensed his legs to spring across the counter at the scar-faced merchant. Milo Trapp's nonchalant chuckle made him wary, and he waited.

"You talk rough, cowboy," Trapp said. "But that's because you don't know Ace Dolan is standing behind you with a gun aimed at your back. I'd advise you to get your horse and ride out of Cactus. You can't buck Milo Trapp. I own most of this valley, and I intend to own the rest of it. That includes the Diamond Cross Ranch."

In the heat of his anger, Morgan had momentarily forgotten the bald-headed man lounging in the shadows. "Ace" Dolan had moved when the argument started. He touched Morgan with the hard barrel of his gun to let him know that Trapp had not lied.

Morgan was not surprised by Trapp's arrogance. From the things he had heard, he had already decided on the character of the scar-faced man. He was a hard, grasping man—land-hungry, lusting for power. He owned everything around the Diamond Cross and it was only natural that he should want it, too. Did he want it desperately enough to kill Cap Maxwell, scare him out by killing his partners and convincing him that all who had shared the Weeping Woman Mine were doomed? Morgan had come to Cactus to investigate this question, and he thought he already knew the answer.

As Ace Dolan's gun jabbed him in the

ribs, the husky cowboy tensed, his eyes narrowing in indecision. He kept his hands on the counter for a moment, his gaze boring into Milo Trapp's dark face. Straightening, he drew his righthand Colt in a deliberate, unhurried motion. He leveled the barrel across the counter. Ace Dolan started to call out a brisk command. Morgan's voice cut in, hard and brittle, before the bald-headed man could finish his threat.

"There's a gun in my back and one aimed at yore brisket, Trapp," he pointed out calmly. "Tell yore man to start shootin' any time. I'll lay yuh two to one I'll let go the hammer before I fall from Dolan's lead!"

Milo Trapp's dark eyes widened in astonishment. "You are the biggest fool I've ever seen, Morgan!"

"Mebbeso," Morgan conceded icily. "But this is a squeeze play and I aim to call it. I'm countin' to three, and yore man better snap his hammer 'cause I aim to snap mine!"

IT WAS a situation which Milo Trapp's wildest guess would not have touched upon. Trapp lifted his eyes over Morgan's shoulder and looked at Ace Dolan, small bubbles of perspiration coming out on his high forehead. Morgan could hear Dolan's booted feet shifting uneasily behind him, and he was sure the bald-headed man regretted his part in this. He would not shoot a man in the back without an order from Trapp, and Trapp was hesitant because of the danger to himself.

Morgan's gun was less than two feet from his thin waist, and reflex action alone was enough to drop the drawn hammer before the cowboy fell.

His own frame straining with tension, Morgan started counting. His voice was low, rasping, and his brown thumb was white from the grip on the cocked hammer. He spoke the first word and waited, hearing through the stillness in the store all the sounds from the street, the ticking of a clock somewhere in the building. He counted again, saw Trapp's black eyes shift uneasily to Ace Dolan's face. Morgan stretched out the silent interval, then pursed his mouth for the last count.

"Wait!" Milo Trapp spat the word out quickly, fearing he would not be in time. "You win, Morgan. Put your gun away, Ace."

The squeak of polished leather was loud in the hanging stillness as Dolan holstered his six-gun. But Wayne Morgan held firmly to his own weapon, his lips drawn in a tight line.

"Tell Dolan to take a walk, and not to come back soon," he ordered flatly.

Trapp hesitated a moment, and then gave the command. He watched Morgan's face dubiously as the bald-headed puncher's steps thumped out to the boardwalk, and died away in the distance.

"Now," the dark-haired waddy continued calmly, "throw yore right leg up here and let me take a look at it. I shot a gent last night who wouldn't fall. I'm thinkin' that was you, Trapp."

Milo Trapp's shoulders sagged with defeat as he complied. Morgan touched the tiny puncture in the side of the trousers, and then yanked Trapp's cuff above the top of his boot. The same puncture showed in the polished leather, and Milo Trapp's unusual stamina was no longer a mystery. From a point just below his knee, Milo Trapp's leg was made of wood! The damage to his clothing was so insignificant that Trapp had not bothered to change that day. But Morgan had been looking for just such evidence, and the indication of many battle injuries had suggested to him that Trapp might have had a leg amputated below the knee and still be able to walk without limping.

A few minutes later, Wayne Morgan returned to the dusty street with a signed receipt in his pocket. Realizing that he was beaten, Milo Trapp had talked freely. As Morgan had surmised, the shot at Cap Maxwell had been merely to frighten him. With the old man already upset, Trapp had sought to capitalize on his fear and take the Diamond Cross Ranch away from him. But it was as far as Milo Trapp's aims went. He denied any part in the deaths of Thad Tate and Grady Sloan, and knew nothing of the other odd happenings in Moonstone Valley.

Despite his clash with the man, Morgan was not disappointed by his visit with Milo Trapp. Since the man openly admitted his desire to control the valley, Morgan believed in his innocence. Milo Trapp was removed from his mind as the manipulator of the plot against Cap Max-

well, and that left only one other suspect.

## CHAPTER XII

### *The Traitor*

UPON reaching the front of Milo Trapp's store, Morgan searched the street with his eyes for Blue Hawk. With the right amount of caution and skill he could soon close a noose around the Moonstone Valley outlaw boss, but he would need the Yaqui's help.

There were two or three copper-skinned halfbreeds squatting in the shade of the saloon awning, but Blue Hawk was not among them. A few other men were moving around the streets, having come in from neighboring ranches as the working day neared an end. Ten minutes earlier the street was deserted, but it would stir to brief life as night approached. As his gaze made a complete circuit, the cowboy saw the hulking, squatty frame of Sheriff Walt Starns blocking the doorway to the adobe jail.

The lawman had seen Morgan and was studying him frankly from the shadow of his hatbrim. On his first visit to Cactus, Morgan had planned to ask Starns to search for a record on Hobe Venter and Stacy Lipps, but the situation had changed now. The half-burned reward poster was proof that Starn's was concealing that information, and it would be foolish to ask him questions.

Returning the sheriff's stare, Morgan shrugged carelessly and walked across the street to the saloon. Blue Hawk might have established a temporary camp outside of town by this time, but Morgan wanted to make sure. The clever Yaqui often pulled his blanket close around his shoulders and slumped in a dark corner of a saloon when he was seeking information.

He stopped in front of the half-doors of Trapp's Bar and looked around him, his nerves strumming with a danger he could feel but could not see. From the corner of his eye he noticed that a stagecoach had been rolled out to the front of the combination livery barn and freight station. The bearded, meek-faced driver and the oldster who had been lounging in the shade at the side of the building, were stacking a few odd packages in the baggage rack. Shan Loring's moonstones would be among them. It was bait that the white-hooded bandit, Little Joe, would not ignore, and Morgan was eager to lay his own plans.

Still alert from some unknown warning from within, the dark-haired waddy pushed through the swinging doors and headed for the bar. He was half-way across the cramped room, still blinking his eyes from the change of light, when the insistent knot of foreboding left his stomach. There was no use for it to stay there now, for the cause of it was before him.

There were four men leaning against the whisky stained bar, all of them engaged in a discussion with the thin, slick-haired bartender. Two of the men were strangers to him, ordinary cowboys with the sweat and dust of range work still on them. Morgan gave them only a passing glance, his full attentio. settling on the others.

Hobe Venter and Stacy Lipps stood side by side at the center of the bar. Lipps had his back to the door, his gleaming red satin shirt catching all the light of the place and holding it. Venter leaned hip-shot at his side, one scarred boot resting on the brass rail and one clubby arm stretched along the edge of the counter.

Venter saw him first and his close-set dark eyes seemed to sink deeper under the protection of his bushy eyebrows. He said something out of the corner of his mouth, and Stacy Lipps whirled around and stared at Wayne Morgan.

Venter's anger was evident in the burnt brown tinge that hot blood brought to his ugly, sullen face. Lipps remained straight and stiff, his hands edging along the line of his gunbelt. The two cowboys looked from one face to another, and walked huriedly from the bar, passing within a few feet of Morgan on their way out. The threat in Hobe Venter's face was a thing that could be felt, and the punchers wanted no part of what was to follow. Neither did the bartender. He rubbed his hands nervously across his spotted white apron and retreated to the other end of the long counter, busied himself polishing glasses there.

AN INSTANT after he entered the saloon, Morgan had seen that Blue Hawk was not there. After his interference with the ambush, Morgan had known that he had not seen the last of Hobe Venter and Stacy Lipps. The two gunmen had not forgotten the licking he gave them. Right now, Morgan would rather have turned and walked away. He had outguessed Milo Trapp, outsmarted and bested the scar-faced man in a test of cold nerve. But one brush with death in such a short interval was enough. He could not always be so lucky, and there was much to be done in Moonstone Valley before morning.

There was no way out of it, however. Venter and Lipps were waiting for him. They were two against one, and they meant to have a showdown. This was the thing his inner senses had tried to warn him against, but Morgan had walked into it. He would have to face it, match his guns and his wits against the two men at the bar.

Morgan went on across the room and stopped in front of the bartender. Keeping his eyes on the two men a few feet away, he said:

"Whisky—straight and mean."

"Leave it be!" Hobe Venter's guttural tones stopped the slender bartender as the man turned away. "Yuh won't need no whisky, mister," he said to Morgan. "Dead men don't drink it!"

Frost settled into the cold blue eyes of Wayne Morgan. He faced Hobe Venter squarely, saw the man's thick fingers forming hooks above his twin guns. Venter was not sparring for an opening. He was making it direct and speedy. Beside him Stacy Lipps was silent and watchful, his thin face pale and tense.

"A man wanted in Texas for murder and rustlin' ought to stay out of trouble while he's healthy, Venter," Morgan said softly. He repeated the information he had read on the reward dodger for a reason. Venter would be fast and so would Stacy Lipps. With the odds against him, Morgan knew any stab that cut deep into the gunmen's nerves would increase his chances of outdrawing them.

Hobe Venter's heavy black eyebrows lifted in surprise and then settled in a more intense scowl.

"Yuh know my name and yuh know my rep. That can mean only one thing. That fat toad of a sheriff has finally got cold feet and called in a U. S. Marshal. That's what I pegged yuh for, mister, and I must be right. I knowed we couldn't believe that stuff about bygones bein' bygones in Cactus, if we'd handle a bootleg job and keep our mouths shut. When the rest of the boys hear about you, mister, they'll blow Starns to Kingdom Come! You'll be gone already!"

Venter's growling threat was a signal for action. As he clamped his thick mouth fiercely shut, his hands rammed with dazzling speed toward his low holsters. That last determined gesture of Venter's lips had told Morgan what to expect, and he moved as the gunman did.

Where Hobe Venter's motions were forceful and jerky, Wayne Morgan acted with the smooth precision of a ball-bearing machine. As Venter's clubby hands stabbed downward, Morgan's wrists flicked effortlessly in a move that eyes

[*Turn page*]

## *"The Cheyenne and the Sioux Are Preparing an Attack—and There's a White Man With Them!"*

BREATHLESSLY, Citizen Scout Carroll reported the treachery he had witnessed, but Lieutenant Blaney of the Cavalry sniffed contemptuously. "Seems to me you know too much about the movements of the Indians," the lieutenant said. "I still think I ought to put you under arrest!"

Between "Cheyenne Jim" Carroll and Dick Blaney there waged a bitter feud that had more than once come to blows. This made it difficult for Carroll to get the help he needed in staving off Indian trouble and nailing the renegade. But Cheyenne Jim never gives up fighting in INJUN HATE, a smashing novelet by Johnston McCulley coming next issue—and his battle for justice will both thrill and inspire you! Look forward to a grand yarn!

could not follow. In a sporting game, Venter would have looked fast. The comparison with Wayne Morgan made him slow. He had his guns out in the flicker of an eyelash, his thumbs clutching at the hammers. That was as far as he progressed, for two sharp explosions shook the rafters of the weathered saloon.

Hobe Venter staggered back a step as the first slug burrowed into his chest, and then took another as the second bullet drove in behind the other. He kept going back then, his steps getting slower each time, and his hips slowly sagging toward his knees. At last he seemed to step completely through the floor, but all he did was fold up backward on the floor and die. A shining trail of blood marked the course of his lifeless body.

LONG before Hobe Venter crumpled, Wayne Morgan swung his smoking Colts toward long-legged Stacy Lipps. He had expected to feel the shock of Lipps' lead before he could turn, and he blinked in surprise when he saw that the dudish gunman had not moved. He still stood in the same spot, his hands raised peacefully over his head as Morgan whirled toward him.

Though he was puzzled by Stacy Lipps' odd behavior, Morgan did not take time to ask the man's reasons. Keeping the hot guns aimed at Lipp's chest, he backed slowly toward the door. He backed straight into the prodding barrel of a gun! As he stopped in surprise, a grinding, wheezing cough blew hot air against the back of his neck and he did not need to turn to see who held the gun. It was Sheriff Walt Starns.

"March right back up front until I can get the handcuffs on yuh, pilgrim," Starns growled. "I seen yuh gun Venter down, and I aim to stretch yore neck for it! Move on!"

Seeing no chance of escape, Morgan obeyed. The ponderous lawman already disliked him, and Morgan did not dare oppose the man while Starns had him at such a disadvantage. He dropped the black Colts at his feet, and walked back to the bar, a sinking sensation of failure welling up within him.

"I always keep an eye on pilgrims like you," Starns grumbled, moving around in front of the cowboy and fumbling at his creaking belt for handcuffs. "Sooner or later I git 'em where I want 'em!"

The fat sheriff shoved Morgan irritably with the gun barrel again, reached out with the open iron bracelet to snap it on the cowboy's left wrist. But the handcuff was never closed. Starns had ignored Stacy Lipps' presence, turning his back on the slim man while he talked to Morgan. Stacy Lipps moved forward with the lithe speed of a dancer, his iron-handled six-gun held in his hand.

With a cruel twist of his lips, the gunman brought the butt of the heavy gun down on Walt Starns' small head. The sheriff's weight shook the building as he crashed down and lay quivering and gasping in the trampled sawdust of the floor.

"Let's get out of here, mister," Lipps said tightly, running for the door.

Morgan did not have to be told a second time. Scooping up his guns on the run, Morgan burst through the half-doors right behind Stacy Lipps. A single leap landed him in the roan's saddle and he galloped swiftly out of Cactus without looking back. There would be no pursuit for a while. It would take an hour for Starns' to recover sufficiently to organize a posse.

In spite of his escape, Morgan felt like he was riding out of one danger spot into another. For Stacy Lipps, humped low over the neck of a fleet-footed bay, was riding beside him and he knew the man could not be trusted.

## CHAPTER XIII

### *A Deal in Blood*

PERHAPS Walt Starns organized a posse, but if he did, Wayne Morgan never knew it. He put the town quickly behind him, circling away from the trail for the first few miles and then cutting back to a wagon road that hugged the side of a brushy gulch a few miles from the Diamond Cross Ranch.

Since his retreat from the saloon he had said nothing to Stacy Lipps, but the thin, gaudily-clad man stayed with him, his pale, shifty eyes flitting often to the cowboy's face. Morgan was both angered and puzzled by his presence. Despite

Lipps' help, he was not a man the dark-haired cowboy could like or respect. He had turned against Venter when the burly outlaw needed him most. His disloyalty might have saved Wayne Morgan's life, but on the other hand it might have saved his own, for neither of the men could match the dark-haired waddy's gunspeed. Either way, Morgan knew the man's principles were cowardly and deceitful.

Feeling safe for the present from any retribution Starns might make, Morgan pulled the roan to a halt in the middle of the brush-bordered trail and twisted in the saddle to look at Stacy Lipps who halted beside him.

"Yuh can spill it now, Lipps," Morgan said flatly. "You ain't throwin' in with me because of any brotherly love. What is it?"

Stacy Lipps' slim mouth twisted in a humorless grin. "I've heard of gents like you, mister. Fast guns huntin' for glory and plenty of bounty money. I want to make a deal with you. I figger you want the rep of takin' Little Joe alive, so you couldn't afford to let me'n Hobe Venter ruin your chance. You won't find no reward on my scalp, marshal, so I think it's safe for me to do business with you. That way you won't have to cut Walt Starns in, and you'll get more help."

"Business like what?" Morgan asked suspiciously.

"Like mebbe fifty thousand dollars in reward money split two ways—half for me and half for you. I can tell you where to find fifteen owlhooters worth that kind of dinero. Once you round 'em up, we can both retire."

A suspicion started in Wayne Morgan's mind by Hobe Venter's words in the saloon was verified by Stacy Lipps. The cowboy was certain now that Moonstone Valley had become the refuge of more than one killer such as Venter. There was an organized gang of wanted men operating at the command of some ruthless outlaw boss and bound to secrecy by the knowledge of their crimes which Walt Starns held over their heads. It was not logical that Starns was their leader, for the lawman was too clumsy to hold together the clever scheme which Morgan was slowly tearing to shreds.

Long ago, Morgan had decided that a motive stronger than vengeance had ruined the lives of those involved in the Weeping Woman Mine. As soon as he had found the moonstone dropped at the Diamond Cross he had guessed the real power behind the plot. It was the "bootleg" job mentioned by Venter.

There were two ways for the cowboy to get the proof he needed to expose the killer boss. Stacy Lipps could answer the incriminating questions, and Little Joe could provide the same help. Morgan preferred to deal with Little Joe. He could not trust a man whose morals were as flexible as those of Stacy Lipps. The thin gunman was ready to sell out his companions, make a deal with their blood, and he could easily have a sudden change of heart and lead Wayne Morgan into a death trap.

"I've heard of men like you, too, Lipps," Morgan replied coldly after a moment's thought. "Too white-livered to be honest, and too greedy to make a good crook! If you'd coyote on yore pards, you'd coyote on me!"

While he had debated Stacy Lipps' traitorous offer, Morgan had made the mistake of turning his head away for a moment. The firm set of the cowboy's jaw had evidently warned the gunman before Morgan replied, for Lipps was ready for him. When Morgan looked back at him, Lipps had the iron-handled Colt in his hand and his gray eyes were narrowed to pin-pointed flares of hate.

"It's a good game that pays off two ways, mister," Lipps spat grimly. "I can take yore body back to Sheriff Walt Starns and he'll pat me on the back for bein' smart enough to play along with you long enough to kill you!"

IT WAS not a matter of choice any more. Stacy Lipps had revealed his true color, and the secret could be hidden only in death. The risk was too great to let Morgan live now. Slowly, deliberately, Stacy Lipps pulled back the hammer on his drawn gun. Fascination for this power of execution he held in his hands turned his pinched face a rosy red. His long thumb turned white as he took careful aim before unloosing the shot that would tear Wayne Morgan's heart out of his chest.

An instant later the shot burst the gripping quiet air of the trail! The breath Morgan had been holding went out of him.

It was forced out by relief, however, and not by a slug from Lipps' six-gun. The shot had come from the side of the trail. Hot lead clanged and squealed as it struck harder metal, and Stacy Lipps' Colt spun from his numbed fingers and whirled into the brush. The thin man cursed in pain, rammed his stinging fingers into his mouth.

Few men could shoot with such accuracy, and Wayne Morgan knew one such man was Blue Hawk. The Indian had either trailed them from town or was camped near this spot.

A moment later Blue Hawk's slow precise voice spoke from the shelter of the undergrowth nearby:

"That shot was for the gun; the next will be for you, Senor Lipps!"

Morgan knew the Yaqui would not show himself in an open display of friendship, and he did not wait for him. The dark-haired cowboy drew one of his own guns, swung to the trail with his coiled rope in his other hand. Working swiftly, he dragged the thin, frightened gunman from saddle and bound his arms and legs, leaving him stretched out on his back in the center of the trail.

Afterward, Morgan stepped back and regarded Lipps with contempt. Playing out the marshal role with which the gunman had saddled him, Morgan said:

"Yuh feel right in with our plan, Lipps. Me and Walt Starns can still collect that bounty, and you'll head the list of prisoners."

Without waiting for the man to reply, he climbed back to the roan's saddle. Until he had turned a bend out of the bound man's sight, Morgan stayed on the wagon trail. Then he cut quickly into the undergrowth, pulled to a halt and looked around him. Blue Hawk appeared from behind a clump of wild rose bushes a moment later, leading the gray behind him.

After hearing of Morgan's tribulations in town, the Yaqui explained why he had not been in Cactus. After leaving Whit Berry in a doctor's care that morning, Blue Hawk had returned to the hideout in the hills. During the morning he had moved the horses and equipment to a more convenient location near the Diamond Cross. In their hasty ride out of town, Morgan and Lipps had passed close to the new camp and Blue Hawk had trailed them, unable to understand the thin gunman's apparent friendship.

Blue Hawk glanced worriedly over his shoulder and reproached the dark-haired waddy for his negligent treatment of Stacy Lipps.

"I do not understand about the bounty, Senor, but the gunman will not be your prisoner," Blue Hawk said. "The knots were careless and loose. He will escape soon. Why did we leave him?"

Wayne Morgan chuckled grimly. "I'm hopin' he'll escape, Hawk, and that he'll go on thinkin' Sheriff Walt Starns tipped off a U. S. Marshal about the killers and outlaws he's been protectin' in Moonstone Valley. They'll think Starns has got cold feet on 'em and is backin' out of the deal. Lipps will go straight to the gang and talk his head off."

"Then it was a trick to make the gang come out in the open," Blue Hawk said, his black eyes showing a twinkle of appreciation at the cowboy's ingenuity.

Morgan nodded. "They'll act about like Venter said they would. They'll come out in the open and go after Starns for double-crossin' them."

BLUE HAWK scowled and searched the cowboy's face with questioning eyes. "I had suspected Starns as the leader of the trouble here, Senor. They would not kill their chief."

"No," Morgan said thoughtfully. "They won't kill their chief, Hawk. Shan Loring is too smart for that."

"Shan Loring!" Blue Hawk echoed in surprise. "The loco one is the killer boss, Senor?"

"That's right, Hawk. It all ties up. Everybody who was threatened or killed met trouble near the mine. That meant somebody was guardin' the place, keepin' prowlers away for some reason. The reason was gold, Hawk. Somewhere up there Shan Loring has found gold! Rather than share with his three partners, he just decided to kill 'em. He made a deal with Walt Starns to get him some men to do the work. Those moonstone shipments Loring makes are a fake. Some of those boxes carry gold under the stones, 'cause the rock dropped by Little Joe at Cap Maxwell's ranch had collected some of the dust. That was what made me suspicious.

Blue Hawk looked dubious and unconvinced. "But he is a wild man, Senor, and the plan was so clever. And the boxes you opened at the stage contained only moonstones. How do you explain that?"

"I'm aimin' to let Little Joe explain that, Hawk. That bandit has been stealin' gold instead of rocks, and he brought some of it to Cap Maxwell as a gift. But don't let Shan Loring fool you. When I fought him, he thought clearly, planned his attack smart. He forgot himself once and cursed without all the mumblin' he usually does. The first time I saw him, I figured it took a pretty good brain to repeat everything twice. Shan Loring is a good actor, but he's also a killer. I think Little Joe can prove all I've said, Hawk."

"But where will be find the bandit?"

Morgan smiled. "The six o'clock stage is carryin' some more moonstones. Little Joe won't miss it. We're goin' to have to hurry so we can talk to the bandit and still get back to Cactus in time to give Sheriff Walt Starns a hand. I'm glad you brought Midnight down from the hills. Wayne Morgan has become right unpopular in Cactus, so this is a job for the Masked Rider!"

## CHAPTER XIV

### *The Fate of Velma Sloan*

HALF a mile below the rocky cut over the mountains, the stage road was made gloomy in the late afternoon by the two ridges that sloped up on each side of it. The undergrowth was heavy, shading the sheltered hollows, and the bearded, meek-faced driver sat hunched on the edge of his seat with his eyes flitting from side to side. He had asked to be transferred from the midnight run, for he still could not forget the violent scene he had witnessed the night before.

As he neared the turn where the trail turned upward to the bare hills, he felt somewhat relieved because he was almost out of the brush and nothing had yet happened to Shan Loring's moonstones. Holding the reins in one hand, he dug out a battered plug of tobacco from his pocket and bit off a sizable chunk, tonguing it back into the corner of his jaw.

Suddenly, he stood upright in the box, his nervous gulp speeding the tobacco on its way. It lodged in his windpipe, almost choking him before he could cough it up. He flung the tobacco to the ground, and finally got the stage stopped, his open mouth working without sound.

The first thing he had seen was the movement of a bush ahead. Then slowly a magnificent black stallion had stepped into view, carrying a black-clad masked man who held two guns in his hands. He recognized the flapping black cape and hard blue eyes of the Masked Rider immediately, tried to voice his surrender. His voice stuck in his throat a moment later as a copper-skinned Indian rode out from the other side of the trail, a Winchester leveled across the saddle of his gray.

"Behave yourself and you won't get hurt," the Masked Rider said, his resonant voice ringing through the hollow as he rode closer. "Now climb down to the ground and keep your mouth shut until we're gone. We're taking this coach!"

The black-clad outlaw swung down and helped the bearded driver to the ground, giving him some advice in low tones. While he held his gun on the man, Blue Hawk fastened the stallion and his own gray pony to the rear of the vehicle.

"I am ready, Senor," the Yaqui said quietly, climbing to the driver's box and taking up the reins. The Robin Hood outlaw nodded, jerked the door open and leaped inside the coach as Blue Hawk started the vehicle rolling.

Still pale with fear and surprise, the bearded jehu stared after the disappearing stage in consternation. He took off his battered black hat and slammed it to the ground in disgust.

"First Little Joe steals that crazy Shan Loring's moonstones, and now the Masked Rider steals the whole danged coach! I was never cut out to do this kind of work."

While Blue Hawk sent the horses humping over the steep ridge, the Masked Rider hunkered low between the seats and waited silently. The Yaqui had received careful instructions before they left their camp, and the Robin Hood outlaw knew he would fill his part of the plan. Somewhere behind them the disgruntled stage driver would be trailing them on foot,

for the masked man had told him that their need for the coach was only temporary. They would leave it for him on the trail ahead.

They were through the rock cut, and twisting north along the rim of the valley when the angry crack of a rifle stopped them. As soon as the shot came, the black-clad outlaw tensed for a spring outside. That warning shot was Little Joe's customary signal.

Rising to peep through the narrow slit at Blue Hawk's back, the Masked Rider saw the white-hooded bandit bring the prancing mustang to a halt beyond the horses. In a soft, muffled voice the bandit demanded that Blue Hawk throw down the crates from the baggage rack. Acting on orders, Blue Hawk made no move to obey. Instead, he openly defied the hooded road-agent.

"It is said," the Yaqui declared, "that you have never shot a driver. Now, you must kill me, Senor Little Joe, or I will drive over you!"

Without waiting for an answer, the Yaqui lashed at the horses and started forward. It was a move with which the hooded bandit had never been forced to encounter before. Though holding a rifle, Little Joe did not offer to shoot. For a moment, the mustang was held stubbornly still, and then Little Joe swerved the horse aside, started to spur on down the slope beside the coach.

THE Masked Rider was not surprised by the bandit's lack of persistence. It was a test he had purposefully planned, and now he was convinced of Little Joe's identity. As the mustang came past the slow-moving coach, the Masked Rider flung the door open and leaped out, his outthrust arms closing around Little Joe's slim waist. The road-agent was whipped quickly from saddle, tumbling lightly to the ground beside the black-clad outlaw.

As the horseman fell, the hood slipped off and a mass of long, shimmering black curls tumbled out on the ground. Even Blue Hawk made a sound of astonishment as a beautiful white-faced girl squirmed and clawed at the Masked Rider's shielded face.

"Take it easy, wildcat," the Masked Rider said breathlessly. "You don't have to fight me. I know you're Velma Sloan and I'm here to help yuh!"

The girl's struggles subsided and the Robin Hood outlaw freed his grasp on her wrist. She stood up quickly, her hands shoved deep into the pockets of her close-fitting cowboy overalls. A small, pearl-handled pistol protruded from the waistband of her trousers, but she made no move to draw it.

"How do you know me, and who are you?" Velma Sloan asked suspiciously, her voice clear and musical now that the muffling hood was gone. "Anyway I'm glad it's over. I've been scared to death ever since I almost walked into a trap last night. As long as nobody but Milo Trapp and the sheriff was interested in me, I didn't have to worry. Trapp was glad to see Shan Loring suffer."

Introducing himself, the Masked Rider explained hurriedly how he had learned her identity and his reasons for unmasking her.

"A friend of mine, Wayne Morgan, told me of a note yuh left with some gold at the Diamond Cross," he said. "The printing was too fine and the language was too good for the kind of men you have around Cactus. Besides that, yuh talked little and never got reckless with a gun like most stage robbers. Then, I saw yuh once when yuh didn't know about it, and I knew that only a woman would be clever enough to fashion a hood from a—a white petticoat!"

Color painted Velma Sloan's creamy cheeks with a fresh beauty, and she shoved the renovated piece of apparel into the brush with the toe of her boot. There was no anger left in her hazel eyes as she turned toward the Robin Hood outlaw and smiled.

Her face sobered as she spoke of the things that had brought the black-clad outlaw to Moonstone Valley.

"Then you know Shan Loring is the real killer," Velma said slowly. "He's not crazy or loco or anything close to honest. He's mad—mad with greed for all the gold he found in an old cave that runs under the tunnel of the Weeping Woman Mine and picks up the lode they lost there. It's the main mineral deposit, and Loring kept searching for it until he found it. His insanity was an act to keep from helping Cap Maxwell and my—my father make up the losses. When he found the

gold deposit, he knew my father and Cap Maxwell would want to divide it equally with all the stockholders, so he kept up his act and did everything he could to get rid of them."

As Velma Sloan continued to talk hurriedly, all the Masked Rider's observations were proved correct. On the day they were killed, Thad Tate and Grady Sloan had gone into Moonstone Valley in a desperate attempt to find sufficient gold to save their ranches. When Velma found her father on the trail, his head battered by a rough stone, the old rancher had forced himself back to consciousness long enough to speak a few words before he died.

He had been in the cave below the mine and found the real vein—a solid sheet of gold between two layers of rock. Sloan had seen evidence that the wealth was being mined in a wasteful manner, pried out from the ore in small slivers with knives and chisels. He and Tate had suspected Shan Loring's deception then and were on their way to see Cap Maxwell when the wild-eyed miner waylaid them.

AFTERWARD, Velma Sloan had surmised that Loring's moonstone shipments were a blind. But the miner had operated cautiously. Once a week he would pack the canvas pouches with gold shavings, covering the top of the metal with a thin layer of moonstones. On other days he had shipped nothing but full boxes of the little blue rocks. In order to get the gold, the girl had held up the stage every time she saw the giant redhead leave the badlands with his pack mules. The shipments were probably going to Loring's banker in Kansas City instead of being claimed by a jeweler.

"You were taking an awful chance posin' as a road-agent," the masked man said seriously. "Why didn't yuh let Cap Maxwell and Whit Berry know about this? That young cowboy has about worried himself sick?"

At mention of Whit Berry a sparkling tear flashed in Velma's eyes, and the Robin Hood outlaw knew she had thought often of the foreman. But like other women of the frontier, Velma Sloan was proud and self-sufficient. She could ride and shoot as well as a man and had no feminine fears of darkness and strange places.

Though she was daring and headstrong, she could not speak of Whit Berry without a tremor in her voice.

"Knowing what I was doing to Whit almost made me give it up," she replied softly after a moment. "But I was afraid to show myself until some honest lawman came to Cactus. I knew Walt Starns was a part of the gang, and Shan Loring would kill me on sight. He knew my father lived long enough to talk, and when I got back to the ranch that day from town, Loring was waiting for me. He—he tried to choke me, but I slipped away and got to my horse. After that I hit upon the idea of the hood. But I'm certainly glad you're here now, whoever you are, Masked Rider. I thought nobody would ever be smart enough to figure things out and help me!"

Motioning to Blue Hawk, the Masked Rider strode to the back of the coach and started untying the black stallion while the Yaqui freed the gray.

"When I found that moonstone at the Diamond Cross," he said over his shoulder, "I figured there was a connection between it and the gold. You must have had some of the stones in your pocket, and when yuh threw the gold down yuh threw the stone, too. Moonstones naturally reminded me of Shan Loring, and then a gent name of Venter mentioned a "bootleg" job. That sounded to me like sneak gold shipments. Your help to Maxwell and that petticoat hood made me decide Little Joe was Velma Sloan, and I knew you'd have proof for all my suspicions."

Velma Sloan nodded, her eyes showing admiration for the Robin Hood rider's infallible deductions. "I have a fortune in gold cached in the cave where I've been hiding. As soon as Shan Loring hangs for killing my father and Thad Tate, Cap Maxwell can divide with the stockholders and still have enough to pay off his debts."

Blue Hawk was already mounted and waiting as the Masked Rider stepped to Midnight's saddle. "I think it's safe for you to see Whit Berry now, miss, but we'll have to move fast to get Loring. He's out in the open now and he'll try to make a clean sweep, kill Cap Maxwell so there'll be no claim on the mine and get Walt Starns for double-crossin' him. We've got to get to Cactus by the time Loring does,

and we've already wasted too much time!"

## CHAPTER XV

### *Death Swap*

LATER, three hard-faced men and a pretty black-haired girl stopped their horses on the outskirts of Cactus and gazed solemnly down the curving street. Darkness lay heavy over the town. The only visible light came from the saloon and the adobe jail nearby. There was only six horses waiting at the rails, and no one walked the warped boardwalks. It was as if the whole range knew that the customary slumber of Cactus was to be shattered tonight by barking guns and cries of death. Or had it already come?

It was hard to tell whether Shan Loring and his gang had already been there. From the rock-crowded badlands to the ramshackle settlement was a long and tiring ride, but the Masked Rider had also used up much time since he left the stage road. He sat the saddle of the big black stallion restlessly now, exchanging silent glances with the stern-faced Yaqui who had stopped the gray beside him. Behind the two companions of the danger trails was Whit Berry and Velma Sloan. But Cap Maxwell was not with them, and it was this fact that made the keen blue eyes of the Masked Rider narrow in a worried fashion behind the eye-holes of the domino mask while he watched the street.

At Velma Sloan's insistence, the masked man had not ridden directly to Cactus. When they left the stage road she had gone with them, persuading the Robin Hood rider and Blue Hawk to circle around the Diamond Cross first. Though she had wanted an escort on her ride to see Whit Berry, her plea had not been entirely selfish.

The girl declared that two men would have little chance against the guns of Shan Loring's owlhoot gang. She could handle a rifle or six-gun as well as a man, and Whit Berry and Cap Maxwell would strengthen their attack.

When they had reached the ranch there had been little time for a joyous reunion. Whit Berry had been speechless with surprise, staring at Velma Sloan for a moment in unbelief. Then the girl spoke, and Whit Berry took her lovingly in his arms. The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk had turned away while they kissed and whispered tearfully between themselves for a few seconds, and then the robed outlaw's quiet reminder of their mission had brought them quickly back to reality.

In the next instant, the Masked Rider was aware that the importance of their mission had been doubled. Whit Berry, still weak from the wound in his head, was alone at the ranch. Cap Maxwell had sent a cowboy named Wayne Morgan into town to pay a note and the cowboy had not returned. Still convinced that all at the Diamond Cross were targets of the mysterious killer, the rancher had become worried, and had gone to Cactus in search of Wayne Morgan.

"Cap was still mad over me bein' shot," the foreman said, "and he was goin' to the jail and rake Walt Starns over for not doin' somethin' about it. If Wayne wasn't in town, it's no tellin' what Cap will say to Starns!"

Realizing that the old rancher was definitely a potential victim of Shan Loring, the Masked Rider searched the streets uneasily for Cap Maxwell's stocky figure while he waited. The wild-eyed miner was almost certain to track down Walt Starns, if Stacy Lipps clung to the false conclusion that Wayne Morgan was a U. S. Marshal whom the sheriff had called to the town.

An open attack on the lawman would disclose Loring's outlawry, and he would make a final desperate gamble for sole possession of the mining claim. The only way he could gain that was by killing Cap Maxwell. The men with him would be fighting for their lives—heartless, depraved men who had found immunity from their past crimes here and would kill the man who had given them freedom and then taken it away—Walt Starns.

"Perhaps we are too late, Senor," Blue Hawk murmured. "It is very quiet."

Whit Berry kneed his mount closer to the Masked Rider's stallion and shook his head in a troubled manner. "If Loring has been here, that means Cap is—"

Before the foreman could complete the sentence, Blue Hawk raised his tawny hand as a signal for silence. The Yaqui

cocked his head to one side and glanced sideward at the black-clad outlaw.

"They are here, Senor!"

IMMEDIATELY the Yaqui's keen hearing was verified. The rhythmic beat of running hoofs was clear above the air, and then a hard-riding group of horsemen swept into view at the opposite end of the street.

Speaking hurriedly, the Masked Rider gave orders. He and Blue Hawk circled through a weed-grown alley and came up behind the two huge boulders around which the town had built its street and huddled its buildings. Whit Berry had allowed Velma Sloan to come this far so he could be near her, but he refused to let her join the fight. He leaned aside and kissed her warmly, and then slipped away to take up his station beside the livery barn.

Though the girl had risked possible ambush and constant danger to recover gold which was rightfully hers, she was again a woman now. She listened obediently to Whit Berry's instructions and then watched him ride away with hope in her eyes that he would return safely to become her husband in a few days.

A shot broke the calm that shrouded the sleepy town of Cactus. Above the explosion rose a high-pitched battle cry, and then other guns took up the chant, one sharp explosion blending with another until it became an unceasing roar.

Slipping hurriedly from Midnight's saddle, the Masked Rider dashed to the shadow of the big rock near the street. Blue Hawk melted into the darkness beside him, his rifle gripped expectantly in his coppery hands. Shan Loring dashed past them, leading fifteen gun-hung men toward the adobe jail a short distance away. Their guns were still flashing and yammering as the masked man moved around to get a clearer view.

As the killer gang left their saddles and sought cover in the darkness, the Masked Rider laid a warning hand on Blue Hawk's shoulder when the Yaqui fingered his rifle impatiently. The robed outlaw had not drawn his own black Colts and there was no sound from Whit Berry's rifle beside the livery barn. None of them were to fire until the Masked Rider gave the signal and the Robin Hood outlaw had no intention of joining the battle until he was sure of Cap Maxwell's whereabouts.

At the first blast of gunfire, the lights in Trapp's bar went out. The patrons there and the other townspeople were taking no part in this fight, but they were waiting and watching from various shelters, wondering what it was about.

Shortly after the outlaw gang dismounted and scattered for shelter, the firing stopped. It took the Masked Rider only a second to see the reason. From the shattered window of the jail a white flag of truce was waving frantically.

An order was bawled through the night and then Shan Loring rode to the front of the jail. There was nothing pitiable about the giant redhead now. He had known what the attack meant and had discarded all pretenses. He was prepared to kill.

Seated solidly in the saddle of a strong-chested bay, Shan Loring's massive shoulders were straight and determined. A broad-brimmed gray Stetson was set far back on his head, and a clean, tight-fitting flannel shirt rippled and rolled with the action of his muscles. Even in the poor light, the masked man could see that the shimmering red beard had been washed and combed, and the straggly hair had been carefully pushed back under the hat to allow better shooting. The rifle which he fondled under one arm made him look like a conquering general riding out to accept the surrender of a continent. He was an impressive figure, a deadly and ruthless man gone mad with greed.

Fat and ponderous, Sheriff Walt Starns stepped furtively out to meet him as Loring drew up at the edge of the walk. The hulking lawman spoke quietly, mopping his flabby face with the palms of his hands while he talked.

"The boys say you double-crossed them and me, Walt," Shan Loring said, his voice full-toned and harsh. "They say you brought in a marshal, they want to string you up. Either I back them up, or they'll turn on me. Let's go, Walt!"

Walt Starns held up a restraining hand as Loring gestured with the rifle. "Wait, Shan. I'm still workin' for yuh. Cap Maxwell come in to see me, and I've got him tied up inside. I'll turn him over to yuh for a chance to hunt down that Morgan hombre and prove I'm playing square!"

THE Masked Rider had heard all he wanted to hear. With riches in his hand, Cap Maxwell was closer to death at this moment than he had ever been before. Whether or not Shan Loring accepted the slow-thinking sheriff's bargain, he would still slay Cap Maxwell, either before or after he killed Walt Starns.

"This is it, Hawk!" the masked man said sharply.

He stepped away from the rock and pursed his lips in a keen whistle as Blue Hawk ran toward the gray. Twenty yards away, Midnight raised his head when he heard the whistle and then galloped swiftly toward the robed outlaw. The Masked Rider leaped into saddle on the run, his hands snaking the worn black Colts from leather.

Shan Loring was still waiting in front of the jail as the black-clad horseman thundered into the open. Behind Loring a dozen bearded men had stood up from water troughs and rain barrels to listen. They came alive at once, startled cries bursting from their throats.

A gun went off and a whistling slug clipped at the corner of the Masked Rider's wind-whipped black cape. The Robin Hood rider's own guns rattled a defiant answer. A lean hunch-backed man threw his arms toward the heavens and dropped silently to the earth. A stocky gunman beside him turned to run as the Masked Rider kept coming, an invincible, grim black shadow of doom for lawless men. Whit Berry's rifle cracked beside the livery barn, and the stocky man went down screaming.

The foreman's shot came at an opportune time. It started a confused rush along the streets, made the killer gang dubious of the number which might have surrounded them. They were all on their feet now, running and shooting. Some of them tried to reach waiting horses, but Blue Hawk had outguessed them. The shrewd Yaqui was there, his rifle gushing flame and hot lead at the terrified outlaws. Horses ran, too, tripping on looped reins and falling. The neighing of spooked animals mingled with the curses of wounded men, and moans of the dying. The appearance of a single, black-clad horseman had started a riot, unloosing a bedlam of sound and movement in the streets of Cactus.

Slowing his reckless charge, the robed outlaw called a command to the stallion. Midnight whirled like a trained performer, rearing high as the masked man turned him back toward the jail. Certain victory had changed so swiftly into disordered defeat that Shan Loring was still dumbfounded. But he came to his senses as the famed Robin Hood outlaw started back up the streets.

The giant miner jumped to the ground, his rifle raised. "It—it's that blasted Masked Rider gent who pulled Maxwell out of the fire we started in the hollow," Shan Loring yelled. "Walt Starns, you dirty son, this was a trap!"

The anger Shan Loring felt toward the black-clad outlaw was turned abruptly on Walt Starns who he believed had betrayed him. The giant miner shifted his raised rifle toward the lawman, an ugly red spark jumping from the muzzle as he fired. Walt Starns jerked convulsively, toppled to the boardwalk and then rolled off into the dust of the street. A wheezing, grinding cough raised a dirty cloud under his face and then the sheriff died.

Flinging a quick look over his shoulder, Shan Loring stepped across Walt Starns' lifeless body and dashed toward the open jail door. Close enough to witness the cold-blooded murder, the Robin Hood outlaw's eyes turned a frosty blue as he left the saddle to go after the fleeing miner.

He had been too interested in Shan Loring to look behind him. Guns were still booming close as Whit Berry and Blue Hawk continued to swap lead with the retreating killer gang. As he hit the ground in front of the jail, he was suddenly reminded that the odds were still one-sided. A rush of air made him turn just in time.

A gangling, bearded outlaw, who had been lying low behind an idle buckboard nearby, sprang at the robed outlaw's back, a rifle drawn over his shoulder like a club. The Masked Rider's arms snapped downward, and the heavy stock whistled past his head. He had ducked rapidly, but he still had not been fast enough. The rifle struck his shoulder, knocking him to his knees. A wrenching pain tore through his back, making him groggy.

CONFIDENT of success, the outlaw stood over him and shifted the ends

of the rifle. With the muzzle two feet from the Masked Rider's face, the killer reached for the trigger. There was not time to stop the shot, and the Robin Hood outlaw did not try. He fell forward from his knees, catching himself with his hands as the rifle roared. Flame and lead hummed through the air where his head had been a moment before.

The fall carried him almost to the killer's feet. Two strong gloved hands grabbed the outlaw's legs like the prongs of a bear trap, yanking his feet from under him. The tall man fell on his back, tried to kick free. Shifting his grip, the masked man snatched at the rifle barrel. The surprised outlaw was disarmed before he could resist. He jerked erect, ready to launch a new attack.

The Masked Rider slammed the butt of the heavy gun against the killer's forehead, and the man lay down again, limp and lifeless this time.

Climbing to his feet, the Robin Hood outlaw pawed the earth for the guns he had dropped. He found them, and stood up at Blue Hawk's urgent call.

"Look, Senor!" The Yaqui was twenty yards away, still answering the diminishing fire of the retreating outlaw gang. "The loco one is escaping!"

Following the Indian's pointing finger, the black-clad man turned back toward the jail. Shan Loring was coming out the door with a squirming, kicking figure slung across one broad shoulder. The giant miner turned left toward Sheriff Walt Starns' buckskin, the only horse that remained tied at the bullet-scratched rail.

His long strides covered the distance to the horse in less than a second. He slammed Cap Maxwell's bound figure across the saddle, jerked the reins free and leaped up behind the helpless rancher. Shan Loring still thought only of the gold claim, refusing to recognize defeat. If he got into the hills, a single bullet through Cap Maxwell's brain would leave Loring as the only owner.

"Loring!" The Masked Rider's booming voice was clear above the dying gunfire as he sprinted toward the red-headed miner. "Loring, stop or I'll kill yuh!"

Shan Loring threw back his head and laughed wildly as he swerved the buckskin away from the rack. "You can't hit me without hitting Maxwell!"

Jabbing the horse's flanks with his heels, Loring hunkered low over Cap Maxwell's sprawled figure and turned to run. But the wild-eyed miner had underestimated the skill of the robed outlaw. Other men might have shirked at the risk involved, but the Masked Rider had full confidence in his own ability. As Shan Loring looked around to voice a final call of defiance, the black-clad man's righthand Colt bucked angrily in his fist.

Shan Loring's taunt rose into a blood-curdling scream, and then the giant miner slipped sideways in the saddle and toppled over the buckskin's shoulder. The Masked Rider's single bullet had entered the man's open mouth as he turned to yell!

The bloody battle ended as it had started—with a single shot. As Shan Loring screamed and died, all other firing ceased and Whit Berry and Blue Hawk walked out to gaze at the big miner's corpse. One of Loring's feet was still

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caught in the stirrup, and the buckskin dragged him through the dust a few yards and then stopped.

Seeing the man who had brought them here and protected them had been killed, the killer gang had no reason to fight longer. Those that remained on their feet made a final rush for freedom. Some of them had died tonight, and others would be tracked down as soon as a responsible law officer was appointed to replace Sheriff Walt Starns.

With Whit Berry and Blue Hawk walking at his side, the Masked Rider rushed forward and lifted gaunt old Cap Maxwell to the ground, freeing his arms and legs and helping him to his feet.

"By the Saints!" Maxwell murmured, "I might've knowed no man could shoot that mad man off'n me, less'n it was the Masked Rider! But what happened to Shan? What's goin' on here?"

"You're a rich man, Cap," Whit Berry said happily. "And I've found Velma! She's safe and waitin' for me!"

*"What!"* The one exploding word that came from Maxwell's lips was more of an exclamation of shock than a question.

WHILE Whit Berry laid an arm fondly across the old rancher's shoulders and told him the facts which the Masked Rider had uncovered, the lights came back on in Trapp's Bar and white-faced townspeople started wandering inquisitively toward the jail. As Cap Maxwell continued to listen and gape in unbelief, he stopped wondering about the disappearance of Wayne Morgan and decided the dark-haired waddy had in some mysterious way brought things to a climax in Moonstone Valley in less than two days, and then left the details to the Masked Rider.

Glistening tears shone in his mild eyes as the old rancher realized that the Weeping Woman Mine had proved successful after four years.

It had brought death to many, but there were still many lives which it could enrich with happiness.

"And the Masked Rider is goin' to share in that mine just like the other stockholders," Maxwell declared happily. He turned to speak to the black-clad man who had stood behind him, and then he blinked in surprise. Aside from the handful of curious spectators who were now crowding around him, the streets of Cactus were deserted.

"I reckon he's ridin' on," Maxwell said then. "Him and the redskin. But that's just as well. Somewhere there's a man that is havin' trouble just like I was. The Masked Rider and his Indian pard will ride this way one day, and he'll have help he never knowed about. Still it don't seem right that they won't take no pay."

Cap Maxwell had no way of knowing that the wide smile on his leathery face as he gazed off into the darkness was as rich as gold!

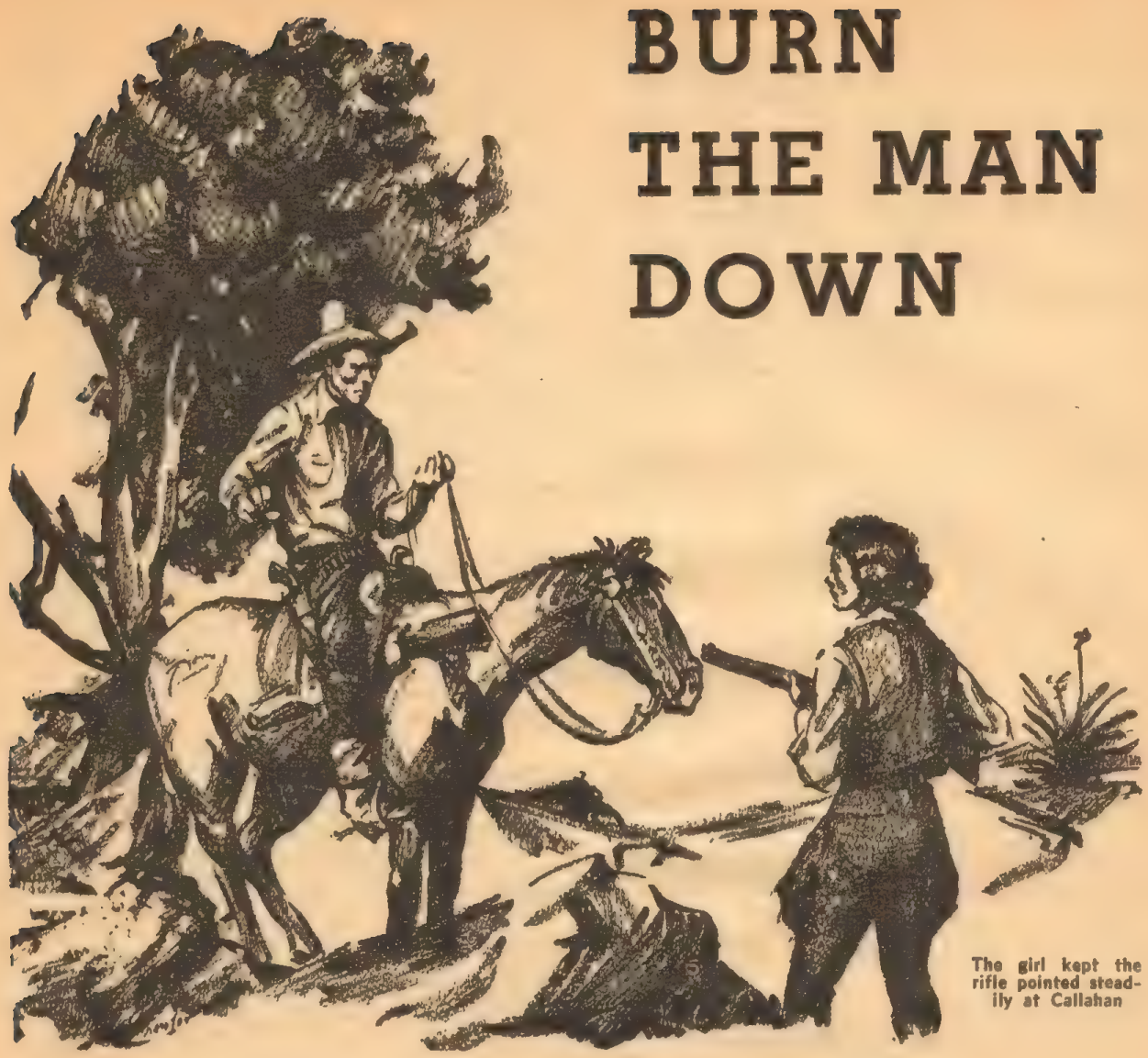
*When a wealthy rancher is ruthlessly slain and the brutal killers seek enrichment by means of a forged will, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk ride once more to see justice done in*

## RETRIBUTION RANGE

By GUNNISON STEELE

NEXT MONTH'S SMASHING COMPLETE WAYNE MORGAN NOVEL!

# BURN THE MAN DOWN



The girl kept the rifle pointed steadily at Callahan

## by JOHN BLACK

*Brick Callahan didn't expect trouble—or the nester's daughter—but met them both!*

BRICK CALLAHAN, cowboy on the loose, was riding leisurely through the canyon when he heard the flat wham of the rifle shot, somewhere ahead of him. He had been whistling contentedly between his teeth, but the whistling halted in mid-bar, and he spoke softly to his dun gelding.

"Whoa, Speck."

The horse halted and the lean cowboy sat for moments immovable, listening. Not a sound broke the silence. The midday sun beat down with savage intensity, but nothing stirred, near or far, that Callahan could see or hear.

"Some hunter, most likely," he muttered, and lifted his reins. The horse moved on. And then he rounded a bend in the trail, and all at once there was noise, plenty of it. A man came slipping and sliding down the steep slope alongside the trail, bringing with him a small avalanche

of sand and stones.

Callahan could tell that the man had had no intention of creating such a disturbance, for when he half fell onto the trail, and got up, he was cursing to himself in a steady monotone. He stood there, brushing dirt from his range clothes and growling oaths through tight lips. He had his back to Callahan, and the young rider watched quietly, amused by the fellow's angry sputtering.

And then the man gave a hitch at his gunbelt, in which rode a black-butted six-gun, and he turned and saw Callahan.

"That ain't scarcely no way to come down a hill," Callahan drawled. "Kind of took the hill with yuh, seems like."

The man stared, startled to silence. He was a hard-looking, burly man of middle age, with a beak of a nose, thin lips, and cold black eyes. Callahan's hand was close to his own weapon, expecting that this citizen would draw on him but, instead of drawing, the man growled a curse and, turning, dived headlong into the brush on the other side of the trail.

"*Hmmmm*!" Callahan grunted, listening to the receding sounds of the man's flight through the brush. "That, Speck, was no hunter—less'n he was huntin' somethin' on two legs, not four. Well, let's go, horse."

They moved on, Callahan's keen blue eyes flicking everywhere, alert for any suspicious movement. Ahead of him, the canyon opened out, became range land, but here it was walled on either side by steep rock faces. The trail was bad, hardly a trail at all, and Speck set his feet down carefully as he moved along.

Another bend, and Callahan ran smack into the business end of a rifle. His eyes held for a brief, surprised moment on the menacing black bore of the Winchester, then traveled up the shining steel barrel to come to rest on the face of the one who held it.

THIS one was a girl—a very pretty girl, and she was crying, tears brimming her dark eyes, running over to spill down her softly tanned cheeks. But the fact that she was a girl and crying did not make that leveled rifle any less menacing. A slug from it would hit just as hard and be just as final, in a girl's grasp, as if a man had squeezed the trigger. Callahan lifted his hands, and then for many seconds there was no sound but her soft sobbing and the jingle of the bit in Speck's mouth as he tossed his head.

"Reckon you're runnin' this here show, ma'am," Callahan said quietly, at last. "What comes next, could I ask?"

"I'm going to kill you," she said then, between her white teeth. "You just shot my dad!"

She turned her head slightly then, and Callahan, his gaze going past her, saw the body lying in the trail, some ten feet behind her. He shook his head.

"I didn't shoot him, ma'am, but I saw the man who did. He took off through the brush, back there."

"I don't believe you," she flamed at him and he saw her slim fingers tighten around the stock of the rifle. "I'm going to—"

*Wham!* From somewhere off to the right a rifle spoke again, the sound of the shot coming just a second after the bullet zinged past Brick Callahan's ear. He was off his horse in a single swift motion, just letting himself go and pitching loosely out of leather. Before the startled girl could move or speak, he had grabbed her, flung her behind a huge rock and thrown himself down beside her.

She still held her Winchester, but Callahan had only his six-gun. There had been no time to snatch his own rifle out of the saddle boot. Speck looked curiously around, then moved a few steps and began calmly shooting at foliage along the trail edge.

"There's your answer, miss," the cowboy drawled between shots. "Feller I saw down the trail knowed I could recognize him if I saw him again, and he wants me out of the way. You, too, I reckon."

The tear-filled brown eyes met Callahan's blue ones, and the puncher felt a thrill run through him in spite of the danger of the situation. "The man you saw?" she asked. "What did he look like?"

Carefully Callahan described the man he had seen, and the girl nodded, her curls bobbing.

"That was Jake Roman. He owns the Rocking R. Dad and I took up claim land on his range. He said he'd get Dad unless we left—fast. Now he's—done it."

Callahan nodded his head soberly. "These big fellers don't like nesters. Me,

I say there's room out here for everyone. And I'm sort of disposed to back up my opinions, like now. Name of Brick Callahan, ma'am; Robert I was christened. What might your name be, miss—just to pass the time till them fellers start shootin' again."

"I'm Reta Jenson," the girl said. "And now—"

A whizzing slug hit the rock, kicked chips in their faces and went wheeing off in the still air. Callahan spotted rising smoke on the opposite slope and reached for the girl's rifle. She surrendered it without protest. Screened by brush at the edge of the big rock, he took careful aim and fired. They heard the bullet hit rock up there, and go screaming off in ricochet.

"He's well holed up," Callahan said. "We'll set tight."

"Look," the girl said excitedly. "Over there."

Callahan looked, felt a small chill go through him. A half dozen riders were pelting into the canyon mouth from the west.

"Jake Roman's men," the girl moaned.

"Comin' to side the boss," Callahan mused. "Nice." He aimed, looped a rifle shot at the riders. Instantly the group exploded like startled quail, and in moments lost themselves in side draws and behind rocks.

"They'll figger to close in on us now," Callahan said.

And they did. Like stalking Indians they surrounded the besieged pair, came at them from all sides. Soon the cowboy's rifle hammer clicked on an empty chamber. Callahan sighed, laid down the useless weapon, drew his six-gun.

He got off two shots and a man howled, rose up from behind a rock, sank down again. It helped a little, but not much. And then, as Callahan prepared to fire again, a rifle bullet came keening and, by unlucky chance, slapped the six-gun out of his hand.

He and the girl stared at each other, appalled.

"That couldn't happen once in a thousand times," Callahan said.

"But it did happen, and now we're helpless!" Her warm shoulder pressed against his own.

She was waiting, depending on him to know what to do, how to save them.

CALLAHAN looked around. Behind them a side canyon angled off, small but passable. Reta saw the direction of his glance, and understood.

"There's a cabin up there," she volunteered "It's solid. If we could get into it, they'd have a hard time getting at us."

"It's a chance," Callahan said. "Come on."

Worming their way through the brush, they moved backward into the canyon. Bullets grooved the ground around them, spat dirt in their faces, but they kept going. Somehow they got to the cabin untouched. Callahan slammed the heavy door, dropped the bar across it, eyed the sturdy log walls around them. The little cabin was a fortress, and for a while at least they were safe. But they had no weapons, and, unless rescue came, it was only a question of time before they would have to give in. And Callahan knew with grim certainty what that would mean. Both he and the girl knew too much to be permitted to live.

Warning slugs slammed into the log walls, then came Jack Roman's shout from the brush, fifty yards below.

"We know yuh can't shoot. Come out of there or we'll set fire to the place and burn yuh alive, yuh nester scum!"

"He will, too," the girl whispered, her face white. "He's that sort."

Callahan took her slim shoulders in his big hands, shook her gently. "Chin up," he said. "We'll find a way."

He began exploring the cabin's contents, delving into corners, into cupboards, everywhere. Searching for something—anything—that would aid them. In a corner he found an old buggy pump, standing in a galvanized iron pail. It was just a hand pump with a short length of hose and a nozzle, probably kept for the purpose of wetting down the shake roof if brush fires got close enough to shower embers on the roof.

Callahan tested the pump, laid it aside. Reta spoke from near the door, where she was peering through a crack. "They're coming," she warned. "Oh, Brick, they're lighting pitch pine torches. down there by the creek. They're starting!"

"Steady, girl." Callahan's eyes roved. The girl's news had given him an idea. He leaped for a broom cupboard in the corner, searched swiftly, and swore under

his breath with delight when he found what he wanted.

"They're coming, Brick," the girl warned. "Coming fast."

"We'll be ready for the danged coyotes," Callahan said, moving fast with his preparations. After a minute and he had the buggy pump in its filled pail by the heavy door, the nozzle thrust throught a crack, covering the approach of the enemy. They were near now, five men with blazing torches, burly and gloating Jake Roman at their head.

"Givin' yuh a last chance, nesters. Come out—or burn!"

"*You* burn, feller!" Callahan shouted and, one hand directing the stream from the nozzle, the other working the pump, he met the advancing men with a small, hard stream.

Water? No—kerosene! Before the stunned attackers could move or think, they were soaked with the inflammable stuff and their torches had set it afire. Roman, in the lead, got the most of it, and he flamed up like a beacon. With a wild howl, he dropped his torch and fled down the hill toward the creek, the other men following in fast and smoking disorder.

Roman didn't make the creek, but fell halfway and lay on the bare ground blazing like a bonfire. But Roman didn't feel it. He would never feel anything again. The other desperadoes reached the creek, leaped in, doused the flame on their clothing.

But when they climbed out, it was on the far side of the creek, and they kept right on going, with no stomach for more of that kind of stuff.

The girl moved close to Callahan, and his arm went around her shoulders. But he was staring in wonderment at the brass nozzle of the buggy pump, still held in his big right hand.

"That," he remarked quietly, "is a new kind of smokespole, to me. But, in a pinch, it sure burns 'em down, huh?"

# The Twice-Hanged Gunman

BILL LONGLEY was his name, and if you hail from down Texas way, you have undoubtedly heard some of the many legends which are still told concerning his almost miraculous facility for escaping death at the hands of the law.

Longley was a big man, standing well over six feet and weighing two hundred pounds, yet so well-proportioned that he looked slender. One of the first of the notorious gunman breed, Longley is credited with having killed thirty-two men.

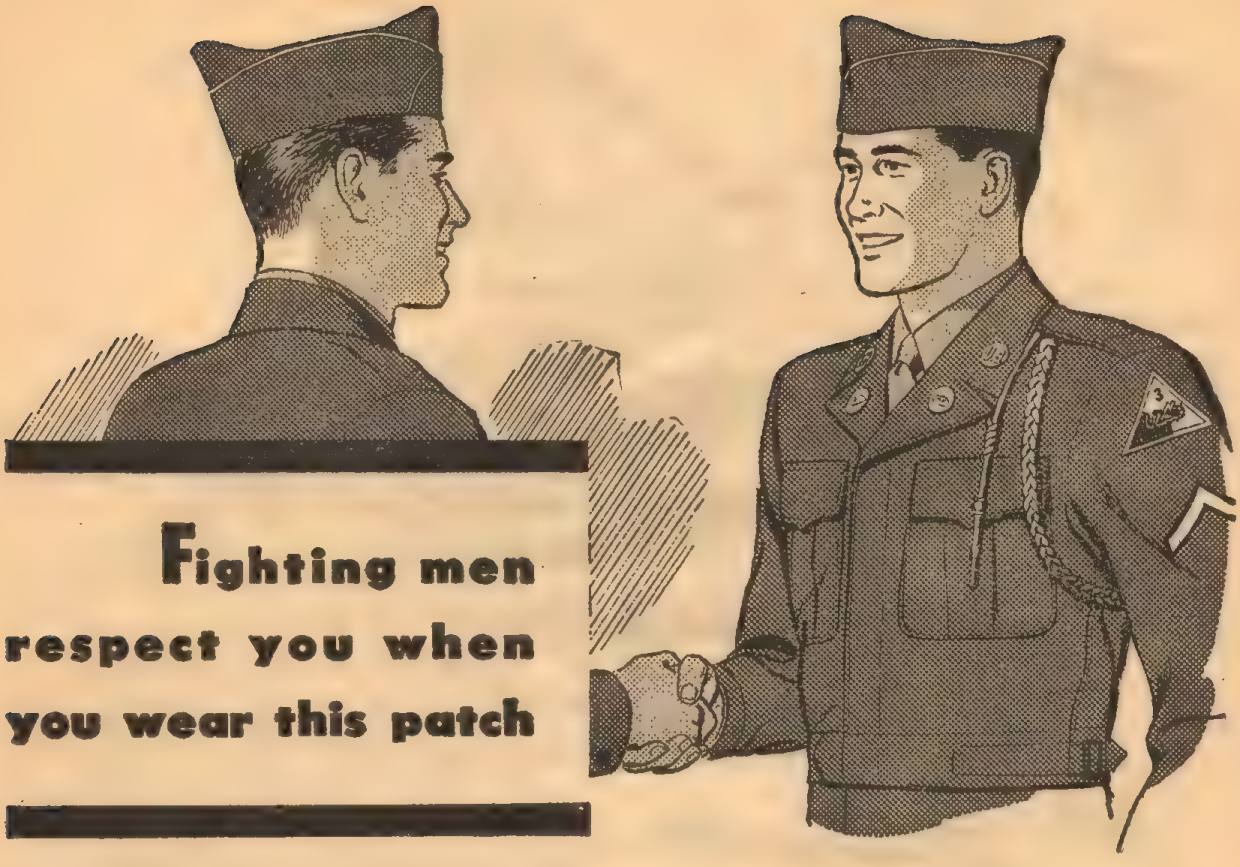
When he was seventeen, his gun already bearing five notches, Longley was captured by vigilantes in the home of a man named Johnson with whom he'd been riding. Johnson was a horse-thief, and the vigilantes decided to string them both up.

As the horses were led forward and the two bodies kicked at the ends of the ropes, the vigilantes turned and gave the salute that was customary after such proceedings—a ragged volley of shots over the heads of the victims. Then the vigilantes quickly reined about and rode away.

One of their bullets had struck the rope supporting Bill Longley, however, and as his great body danced convulsively at the end of it, a strand parted. Then another broke, and another. Longley fell to the ground, the noose still tight about his neck.

Johnson's kid brother, who had watched the grim proceedings from cover, quickly darted out and cut Longley free of the noose, then cut the thongs which bound his wrists. Longley regained consciousness and cut Johnson down, but the latter was already dead.

Ten years and twenty-seven killings from his first date of hanging, Bill Longley was hanged again. This was at Giddings, Texas, in 1878. And even then the job was a slipshod one, Sheriff Brown and his deputies having to hold Longley up after the drop and tighten the rope which had slipped on the crossbeam. Eleven minutes later, the attending physicians pronounced the twice-hanged gunman dead.—*Tex Mumford.*



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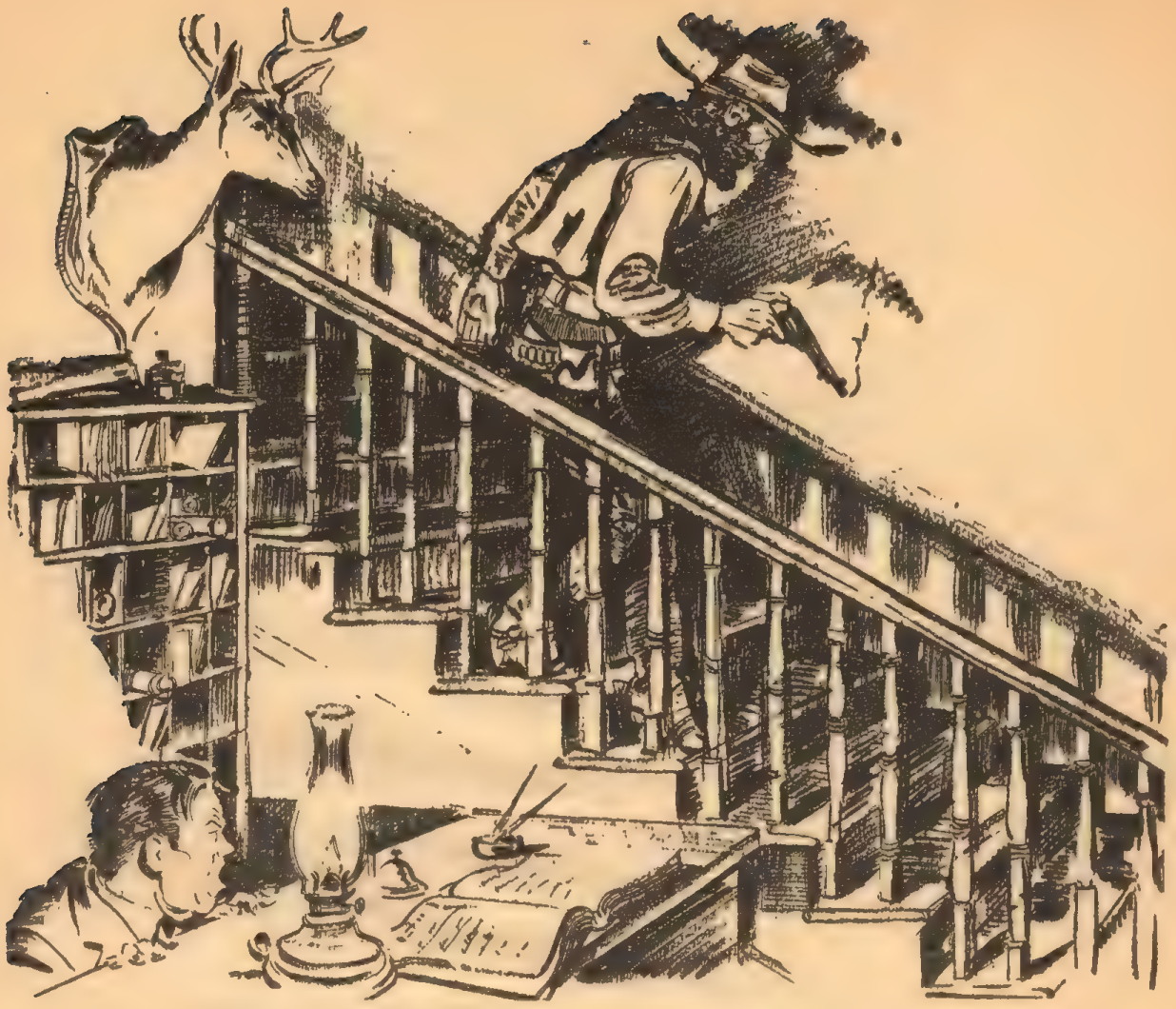


# Heir to Gunsmoke

*a novelet by* **JOE ARCHIBALD**

## CHAPTER I

### *Man on the Dodge*

JUST before full dark, Ben Stuart came around a bend in the wagon road and came upon the small settlement a man had told him about nearly seven hours ago. It was really a stage stop, the man had said, a place for travelers to stretch cramped muscles and slake their thirst if so inclined. Its reputation was not of the highest, but if a man minded his own business he could rest comfortably there, without locking his door. The place was called McVicker's.

Stuart angled down the slope, crossed a V-shaped meadow and stopped in front of the two-story frame building. Behind the hotel were several outbuildings with sagging roofs, and a corral. Lamplight shone through the cracked curtains at the windows, and Stuart heard a medley of

*It's his father's ranch which Ben Stuart plans to take over—an outfit drenched with blood and tragedy!*

Ben's Colt was clear of leather when a shot boomed overhead, and the gunman pitched down the stairs

voices and smelled McVicker's kitchen. He rapped on the door, sagging boards creaking under his boots. A bald man with little puffy eyes opened the door and eyed him suspiciously.

"It's a public place, friend. Why the formality?"

Stuart said, "I am careful at times. Can I hire a room?"

"Got one left," the bald man said. "Come in."

"I'll turn my horse loose," Stuart said.

"Hay and oats in the barn, friend. Help yourself. The flat price for the bronc is three dollars."

A few minutes later Ben Stuart walked into the hotel and got his key.

The bald man said, "I'm Ed McVicker. I hope you'll sleep good. A good drink of whisky is what you need."

"It was already on my mind," Stuart answered with a grin, and went into the bar. It was an ill-lighted cubby hole and rank with the smell of unwashed bodies and the strong stuff McVicker sold. A half a dozen men crowded the small pine bar and their talk stretched thin when Stuart entered. One wary and comprehensive look around convinced him that the customers here were of one and the same fraternity and that he needs must weigh his words if he chose to speak.

He nodded to the men and called for his particular brand, and for the first time that day realized how weary he was. He reached into his pocket and came up with a crumpled bill and some odd change and dropped them on the bar and grinned dryly at the little beady-eyed man handling the bottles.

"Hope the prices are right. Like to have enough left for a drink the next sundown."

The barkeep picked up the dollar bill and crammed it into the till, and eyed Stuart sourly. "Grub line?" he asked unpleasantly.

STUART curbed a fitting retort that came to his tongue, and forced a smile. He nodded, downed his drink, and walked out. The talk rattled on in the bar once more as he made his way up creaking treads to the first floor, walked down a corridor lighted by one smoky lamp and turned into the third room on the right. The furnishings were stereotyped, no different than he'd seen in a score of other stopovers.

There was the iron bedstead with a thin and hard mattress, a chair, and a rickety commode. The one window looked out onto a sloping roof and the corral where he'd left his horse. He got the wick of a lamp burning and turned it high, and sat down to collect his thoughts, and go over in his mind for the hundredth time the words of a letter he carried.

He had his memories and his regrets and wondered if it would be worth his while to ride the remaining ninety miles to the Rocking H. Fatigue wound through his mind like stringy wisps of cotton and defied concentration, and so he started to remove his boots when he heard hurried steps out in the hall.

Stuart had left his door open a crack so that the air would circulate and get rid of the bug-killing smell. He leaped to his feet when a man came in and shut the door behind him, and pressed his back against it. His eyes asked Stuart not to make any sound. They were wide and filled with fear.

"Blow out the lamp, friend," he said.

Stuart appraised the interloper briefly before obliging. He was a medium-sized man with a long and stubbled face, and wore a dirty checkered shirt and faded dungarees rolled up over cowman's boots.

Stuart snapped, "You pack a gun. If trouble—"

"No chance against him," the man whispered hoarsely. "It's Perrin. Come in a few minutes ago and spotted me. Thinks I turned a sheriff loose against him one time. No time for talk!"

He waited no longer for Stuart, crossed the room quickly and blew out the lamp, and just as the room was plunged into darkness, Stuart heard the slow, measured tread out in the corridor. The sounds faded at his door and then the dim light of the corridor seeped into the room. A voice said:

"Come out, Odum!"

Ben Stuart said, "Who the devil are you? Reckon you got the wrong room, mister."

"Saw him duck in here," the man snapped, and threw the door wide. "All right, you sneakin' rat!"

"Perrin, don't move!" The authoritative voice boomed along the hall and came

down from the head of the stairs. Perrin pitched to the side, drawing his gun. Gunfire roared before he had the weapon clear and the echoes of it broke and ran through the frame house, and Stuart thought he could hear the walls shake. He saw Perrin drag himself to his feet, his gun still in his hand. Another shot crumpled him and he fell on his face and lay still. Then there were footsteps again and Ben Stuart called out:

"It's safe enough. I've got your man covered."

A tall and bulky man with a heavy black mustache appeared and nudged the dead man with his boot, then looked at Stuart.

"What was he huntin' for, mister?"

"You're guessin' wrong, Sheriff," Stuart said. "Ask this hombre who come runnin' in here." He turned and gestured toward the frightened man huddling behind the bed. "I never heard of Perrin. I'm just a man passin' through who stopped for some sleep."

The lawman stepped into the room and looked at Odum long and hard. "All right, chew it fine."

"There was a time when I rode with Perrin," Odum said shakily. "I cut loose from him, and just afterwards a posse jumped his hideout and he figured— I was downstairs havin' a drink when he came into the hotel. He recognized me just before I made it toward the back stairs and I come here and asked this man to hide me. I'm ridin' for the Slash O, Sheriff. They'll tell you there I'm straight."

"All right," the sheriff said. "Was only after Perrin. Spotted him up near Box Butte early this mornin' and have been on his trail ever since. Sorry to disturb yore rest, friend," he said to Stuart. "I was you, I'd pick a more peaceful spot the next time you feel like hirin' a bed."

A few minutes later Stuart sat on his bed and listened to the sound of Perrin's body being dragged along the hall. Odum let his breath sough out with immense relief and then stared at Stuart. "Figure I'll know the first night's rest for a long time, mister," he said. "You look kind of familiar to me. Name wouldn't happen to be Stuart, would it?"

AT THIS Stuart's tired eyes leaped to life. "It would," he said.

"Got a good memory for names and faces," Odum said. "Practised it one time because it helped keep me alive. Seems the first name of the Stuart I saw in and around Piedmont down in the Musselshell country was Harry. He must've been around forty-five years old, friend."

"My father," Ben Stuart said huskily.

Odum's eyes got bigger and the unease came back into them. He asked, "You headin' back to that spread? The Rocking H? Figure that old hellion won't like it much, Stuart."

"Sanderson?" Stuart got to his feet and towered above Odum and his face was unpleasant in the lamplight. "You know too much, mister!"

Odum shook his head. "I remember too much, my friend. Don't get spooky. You did me a favor and I want to do somethin' in return. There are some things you want to know right now, I figure. Knowin' them you won't go down there an' batter your head against a blank wall. Am I right?" Odum took the makings from his shirt pocket and built himself a smoke. "I've made mistakes, Stuart. I wa'n't always on the side of the law as you most likely have guessed by now. I helped Perrin run off plenty of your father's stock."

Ben Stuart went back to the bed and sat down. He studied Odum's face and marveled at this fortuitous combination of circumstances. A man's life, a preacher had told him years ago, was a definite pattern, and none of man's making. Stuart could believe that now.

"I'm listening, Odum," Stuart said.

"We was up in the Battle Hills the day the old man and two punchers come ridin' in. Sanderson made a deal with Perrin. He would split the profits even on all stuff the rustlers took off Rockin' H range. Lot of the old man's riders got extra pay for not bein' around when the raids took place. I figure Perrin rustled close to five thousand head 'fore Sanderson held things up."

Ben Stuart had had something like that in the back of his mind for a long time. His fingers were splayed and rubbing the cloth at his knees and they itched to get around his grandfather's throat. There was no more indecision left in him. He would start for the Rocking H early in the morning.

"I'm obliged, Odum," he said.

"Hope that squares us up some, Stuart," the puncher said, and got ready to go. "Give my regards to Bull Sanderson, and his foreman, Mott Geyer."

"In due time, Odum," Stuart said.

He sat in the dark a long time after the puncher had gone, and now many things were clear. The letter in his pocket was written indelibly on his brain and he ran through it again:

Dear Ben:—It is my sorrowful task to write you of your father's death. Got took with pneumonia and did not seem to have the will to fight. He instructed me to get in touch with you and give you an account of how things stand on the Rocking H. Your father had reverses the past few years and mortgaged the ranch up to twenty thousand dollars. Sanderson holds those mortgages, and intends to foreclose if back interest and penalties aren't paid within thirty days.

There is something here that don't meet the eye, Ben. Looks like the old hellion worked it slow and is ready to grab, but nobody has proven a thing on him. Almost unbelievable a man could hold such a grudge so many years, but like they say a man can pick his friends but not his relatives. Back interest and penalties amount to about two thousand, Ben, and there's little doubt but that Sanderson will insist on some amortization of the mortgage itself.

One thing your father made quite clear and that was to see Jim Bonner the minute you got to Piedmont. Sounded mighty important. Of course I realize you might not even want to come back this way again, but your father, before he died, was certain you'd come back in a hurry.

Very truly yours,
John H. Kirkman, Atty.

The years came rolling back in and over Ben Stuart and he thought of many things he'd tried hard to put forever out of his mind. When he'd grown old enough to know certain things, Bonner had told him that Bull Sanderson had never approved of the man his daughter had married. He'd moved in with the couple and made life a hell for all concerned. Finally his mother had had enough and had gone away, taking him with her. Harry Stuart had expected them to come back, had waited too long, and when he'd realized there could be no reconciliation, had resigned himself to building up the Rocking H in spite of opposition.

Bull Sanderson had been a rough and tough old devil at sixty, and Ben Stuart did not believe a few more years had bent his back or softened his hickory heart. Sanderson had been one of the few men he'd ever seen carry two guns, and there were people that said he had killed his quota of men.

Sitting in the bleak room at McVicker's, Ben thought, He'll be thinking and wondering too, that hellion. Wondering if I'll come back, and planning how to handle me. He's just mean enough to cover up what little remorse there might be in him by gunning me down.

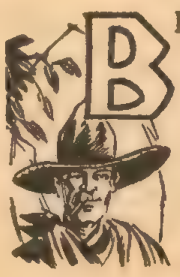
He got to his feet and grinned as he felt of the money sewed up in the lining of his vest, and wondered how an old desert rat was up near the Idaho line.

Ben Stuart had punched cows and hauled freight and driven a stage since he'd come of age. Then one fine day he met one Sundance Moger and had staked him, and the sourdough had found bright stuff and had cut Ben in for half. He'd sold his share in the small diggings to Sundance two weeks ago for close to five thousand dollars, just after he'd received the letter from Kirkman in Piedmont. He figured he was going to enjoy the look on Bull Sanderson's face when he paid off the interest on that mortage and laid down a couple of thousand against the principal.

He was up at dawn, and after feeding himself and his horse, took the road from McVicker's and rode southwest until he came to a line cabin at the mouth of a canyon. He asked the punchers for directions, and getting them, took a narrow trail that wound upward for several miles. Coming out of a string of timber he looked down upon a sizable town where he would pause awhile and line his stomach. How many towns since leaving a week ago? There would only be a few more.

## CHAPTER II

### *Crippled Foreman*



BEN STUART rode into the town of Piedmont late one afternoon when the traffic on the Y-shaped three wide streets was stepping up. Some faces looked vaguely familiar as he got off his horse in front of a big false front and looked up at a window and read the letters printed thereon: *J. H. Kirkman, Attorney at Law.* The town hadn't changed much save for the

fading of paint and signs of rot on the boards of the walks.

He went up a long flight of stairs to Kirkman's office and walked in without knocking, a man no longer concerned with obedient bows or holding his hat in his hand. And then he looked at Kirkman and the man occupying the extra chair, his grandfather, "Bull" Sanderson.

The old rancher's eyes blazed recognition and Stuart knew they were as bright as they ever were. There was a faint sprinkling of white in his spade beard and a few lines in his face were deeper, that was the only change there was in him. He wore a cowhide vest and a pair of scruffed corduroy pants tucked into high cowman's boots, and the battered hat Ben Stuart believed was the only one he'd ever owned.

"Blast my eyes, Kirkman, he come back!"

KIRKMAN smiled his pleasure and got up and thrust out his hand. Bull Sanderson sat where he was, glaring, and one gnarled hand resting on a gun holster.

"Kind of expected you, Ben. Pull up a chair."

Ben Stuart said, "No use wastin' time, Kirkman." He took a jackknife from his pocket and snapped a blade loose and ripped the lining of his vest away. He took out a sheaf of bills and stood there holding it in his hand.

"Reckon we can take care of the interest money and other details," he said, and met Sanderson's black look. The old man got out of his chair as spry as of yore and roared:

"One thing at a time, you young squirt. I'm here to see I get satisfaction from your thievin' father!"

Ben Stuart's hand slapped against his gun handle and he drew before Sanderson could get his own fingers in play. Kirkman threw himself against the puncher and the Colt went off and bored a hole in the ceiling just over the stunned Sanderson's head.

"You'd kill your own gran'father?" Sanderson bellowed, visibly affected by Stuart's swiftness.

"Never figured I had one, blast you!" Stuart roared. "The next time you pass an insulting remark about my father, I'll put a bullet through your skull!"

Sanderson said, "I'm here findin' out the law, Ben," and he fell back in his chair with little beads of sweat glistening on his high forehead. "Few weeks before your pa took sick he sold twenty-five hun'red head of Rockin' H cattle without my say-so. Got better'n ten thousand dollars. Man over at Alta Vista showed me the bill-of-sale. Harry had no right to sell cows didn't really belong to him, and I aim to get the money or the stock back."

"That right?" Stuart asked Kirkman, and the lawyer nodded his head.

"Seems that was about the size of it, Ben."

Ben Stuart laughed in Sanderson's face. "This old curly wolf talks about crooked dealin's, Kirkwood! He was robbin' the Rockin' H blind all the time Dad was alive!"

Bull Sanderson leaped to his feet, his weathered face livid, but again the gun appeared in Ben Stuart's hand.

"Make that clearer, you brash bucko!" Sanderson yelled.

"Met a badman named Perrin up near the border, Sanderson," Stuart said, and waited for the effect.

The old man's eyes did not change but Stuart saw a muscle in his face jump. "Seems you an' Perrin had an understandin' that finally drove my father to get in debt to you. You split two ways with that outlaw for every Rockin' H steer that was driven off the range. What puzzles me, old man, is why you didn't kill Perrin when you had no more use for him."

Kirkman slowly took a long cigar from the corner of his mouth and eyed Bull Sanderson. "If he can prove that, my friend, I am afraid you'd better forget about getting help from me."

"He can't prove it," Sanderson ground out, and seemed to be weighing his chances with the heir to the Rocking H. Cold fury was in his eyes as they held to Ben Stuart's accusing glance, and the lawyer knew that here was an example of a cliche in reverse. Water was thicker than the blood between these two, and a shiver went through him.

"If I have to I figure I can," Ben Stuart said. "I heard you've got a new foreman named Mott Geyer. What became of Jim Bonner?"

BULL SANDERSON said nervously, "He's around. He quit the Rockin' H just after your ma left. He couldn't stand the gaff." He took an old pipe from his vest pocket and crammed scrap tobacco in it, and his hands shook a little. "Jim had kind of an accident."

Kirkman said, "Little late to do business today, Ben. Come in first thing in the mornin'. You be here, too, Sanderson." He was at the window looking down into the street. Neither the old man nor his grandson saw him signal to someone outside. "Don't see why you aren't the rightful owner of the Rockin' H once you discharge certain obligations."

"He'll have a devil of a fight to hold to it!" Bull Sanderson roared. "I'll not stand by and let a saddle tramp walk in and take what he never worked for."

"You'll get your stomach full of fight," Stuart promised. "How many hired killers on your payroll, Bull?"

The impersonal manner of address seemed to sting Sanderson, and the lawyer nearly felt sympathy for the man. He was glad to see Sheriff Wes Koch come into his office. Koch's brows lifted when he saw Ben Stuart, and he felt the tension in the room as though it was a material thing shouldering against him.

Ben Stuart said, "Sanderson, you'll give Geyer his notice tonight.'

Bull Sanderson lost control and leaped toward Stuart, but Koch caught him by the arm and violently threw him off balance. The rancher crashed against Kirkman's desk and the lawman's gun was trained on him when he pulled himself erect.

"Better get out of town and cool off, Bull. Do some tall thinkin' tonight, *sabe?*"

"I'm thinkin' now," Sanderson said, his voice quiet and more dangerous, and walked out of the lawyer's office.

"Welcome home," Ben Stuart said thickly, and made a wry face. "The old hellion is worse if anythin', Kirkman. I better go and see Jim Bonner. Where's he livin'?"

"Small place a mile out, Ben. At the first fork in the road," Kirkman said, and began to riffle papers on his desk. "Get set for a surprise on your way out. Sally's grown up."

*Sally.* He remembered her as a stringy girl of twelve with straight honey-colored hair who always chewed her fingernails and had a gap between her two front teeth. She had always been an abstract quantity so far as he was concerned. When he got out into the street he had already put her out of his mind. He saw Bull Sanderson talking to a man on the porch of the hotel when he got into the saddle, and riding out of town could not be sure if it was the late afternoon sun or his grandfather's baleful eyes striking between his shoulderblades.

Ben Stuart soon came to the small white house at the fork in the road and read the name Bonner on the tin mailbox. He hitched his horse to the post supporting it and walked up a long path fringed by garden flowers. He heard a woman singing and smelled the supper cooking when he stepped up to the little veranda and rapped on the door. A short silence fell, and then a voice said:

"See who it is, Sally."

The door swung in and Ben Stuart stared at the girl in the frilly apron and got the shock Kirkman had promised him. Sally's hair had become a rich chestnut color and it was parted in the middle and gathered into a chignon at the nape of her neck. Her cheeks were flushed from the stove's warmth and there was a dab of biscuit flour on her nose. As she met his glance her eyes slowly widened and her full lips formed a big round O. The gap in her pretty front teeth was gone.

She said in a small voice, "Ben. Ben Stuart." She turned quickly. "Dad, it's Ben Stuart."

"What?" Bonner's voice had a glad ring to it. "Come in, Ben! Come in!"

As Sally stepped aside to let him pass, Stuart said, "You don't look too pleased. You'd be even prettier if you smiled." And then he looked at his father's old foreman and all the levity went out of him.

Jim Bonner was sitting in a wheelchair, a light blanket thrown over his knees, and the cheeks of his once rugged face were sunken in. His eyes mirrored the suffering he had borne even when he grinned and held out his hand.

"Quite a man, Ben. I made a bet with Kirkman you'd come back."

THE girl hurried out into the kitchen and shut the door behind her, and Ben

Stuart was certain she would have been pleased if her father had pulled a gun on him.

"Jim," Stuart said. "What happened?"

"Sit down, Ben," Bonner said, and picked a cold brier off the table beside him and set it to burning. He puffed at it for a few moments and then began to talk very slowly, keeping his voice down:

"Your father came to me a few weeks ago, Ben. Seems some men get what they call a premonition or advanced notice their time's near up. He had nothin' to leave you but a mixed up mess and wanted to get hold of a bunch of cash. He had a hunch Bull Sanderson had milked him dry and so his conscience didn't bother him none when he put over that cattle deal. He sent for me, asked me if I wouldn't go to Alta Vista an' pick up the money because he suspected Bull was keepin' close tabs on him. That old devil didn't mind Harry sellin' the stock. It was not gettin' the big share of the cash that drove him wild." Bonner found his pipe had gone dead again and tossed it onto the table.

Ben Stuart got up, crossed the room quickly to look out the window. Bonner said, "Nobody'll be tailin' you, Ben. They know I haven't got the money."

Stuart went back and sat down. "I went to Alta Vista and picked up ten one thousand dollar bills, Ben," the old Rocking H foreman said. "Four miles out of town I was shot in the back and knocked off my horse. When I woke up the money was gone. And that's why you see me as I am now."

"It wasn't worth all that, Jim," Stuart said, hoping he was keeping the pity from showing in his eyes. "You figure Sanderson was to blame?"

"Not exactly, Ben. The hellion has made too much of a fuss over the stolen money himself. If he had it—"

"He could be faking," Ben said. "To cover up. You quit the Rocking H, Kirkman said."

"Not so long after your ma took you away," Jim Bonner said. "I couldn't stay there without drivin' a bullet into Sanderson sooner or later, and I knew it. Only way I can figure it, somebody overheard Harry talkin' over the sale or that cattle buyer, George LaManna, tipped somebody off as to when the payoff took place an' who carried the cash. Fact remains I lost the ten thousand, Ben, an' won't ever ride a horse or walk again!"

"LaManna, he's been around a long time, Jim," Stuart said. "What's his reputation?"

"I've heard a man always had t' keep an eye peeled an' his wits about him when he did business with LaManna, but don't recall he ever was caught in a crooked deal," Bonner said.

Ben Stuart thought, Perrin and Sanderson could have used LaManna in disposing of stolen Rocking H stock. The cattle buyer could have sensed Harry Stuart's intentions when Bonner had come with an authorization to pick up the money, and had seen an extra profit in the transaction. Aloud he said, "Once a man is sure of the crookedness of others, he can easily cut himself in on any deal they choose to make."

Jim Bonner was about to reply when the kitchen door opened and Sally announced that supper was on the table.

"You set a place for Ben, Sally?" Bonner asked.

"No, I had no idea he was to stay."

Jim Bonner snorted his disdain. "Imagine a rancher's daughter actin' up like that, Ben? She knows we never turn away even a scraggy range bum if he's hungry."

"Seems I'm of a lower breed than that, Jim," Stuart snapped. "Thanks for askin' me, but I'll get my grub in Piedmont. I want you to know this. I'll square things for you if it takes all the rest of my years." He exaggeratedly bowed to the girl, turned toward the door. He heard her say something just as he slammed the door behind him.

## CHAPTER III

### *Clash With Geyer*

PIEDMONT was humming with sound while Stuart ate an unpalatable meal in the restaurant across the street from the Palace, the town's biggest saloon and gambling hall, and for the first time in his life he realized that his thoughts were disturbed by the vision of a woman. Perhaps, he

told himself, lonesomeness could make any man vulnerable, and he decided to go over to the Palace and dance with some of Kel Duchain's girls, and so set his brain to rights.

He walked through the ornate glass-paneled batwing doors and to the bar where he had a drink, then picked himself a table near the small stage and waited for developments. A girl with bright auburn hair and wearing a low-cut tinseled dress sat down beside him and gave him a wide and toothy smile. He bought her a drink and asked her to dance, and a few minutes later knew he had not found the cure for what was bothering him. He dismissed the woman as politely as he could and went back to his table, and soon was watching with interest a tall figure of a man at the end of the bar.

The lights dimmed before he could fully measure the man and the keys of the piano tinned out. Kel Duchain came out to the stage and announced Roxanna, and called her the most beautiful woman with the sweetest voice west of the Mississippi.

The star of the Palace slipped out from behind wine-colored drapes and Ben Stuart had to admit Duchain was right on the first count. She wore a black velvet dress and her bare shoulders were creamy white in the half-light. Her hair was as black as the velvet. Her voice was average, Stuart judged. That was all it had to be.

When she had finished, the applause could be heard on the edges of town. The lights went on again and Stuart looked for a man and saw him shouldering his way through the customers to the stage.

Duchain stopped this man ten feet from the lamps stringing along the front of the stage and Ben Stuart easily read the displeasure in the saloon owner's eyes. Out of the confusion of sound, Stuart heard a puncher remark:

"Geyer's ripe for a fight."

Mott Geyer, Bull Sanderson's foreman! The man wore a dark blue broadcloth store suit and a white shirt and stringy black tie. His face was burned the color of a well-polished saddle and was as ruggedly built. Geyer towered half a head over Duchain who could not be called a small man, and his shoulders bulged powerfully under the dark cloth.

Ben Stuart watched Geyer look up at the singer for a moment. He saw him turn irritably away when Duchain said something, and half way to the bar Sanderson's man turned and threw a word at Duchain that darkened the gambler's long, thin face.

Geyer went up to the bar and a bottle was banged down in front of him. He had two drinks, then shoved the bottle away and walked out of the Palace. Duchain stepped onto the stage and finally slipped through the drapes, and not far away a man laughed and remarked:

"Kel don't want another rope dropped over her pretty shoulders. If Geyer figures she's a maverick—"

Ben Stuart wondered about something he considered unusual, but could not put the finger of his mind on it. Mott Geyer was not the first man he'd ever seen who'd like to dress up four ways from the jack when he came in town for some fun. A girl came along and was promoting profits for Duchain when Geyer came back into the Palace, and broomed the immediate vicinity with his eyes. He suddenly called out:

"Is there a man named Ben Stuart here?"

Talk and laughter and other sounds quickly faded when Stuart rose to his feet.

"Right here, Geyer," the puncher said and moved out into the open, wondering where the foreman kept a gun. He took a swift inventory of the big man and knew he would have to show the people of Piedmont right here that he was boss of the Rocking H. Geyer grinned insolently.

"Met Sanderson awhile ago, my friend. He gave me your message, Stuart."

"You're entitled to some notice, Geyer," Stuart said quietly. "How much you want?"

Mott Geyer laughed loudly. A lot of punchers supported him.

"You think you're big enough t' run me off the Rockin' H, Stuart?" he jeered. "It's the only way I'll leave. You got that straight? I take orders from Sanderson and aim to keep on!"

"You're fired, Geyer," Ben Stuart said. "As of tomorrow mornin'!" He moved in close and met the man eye to eye, knew it was also in Geyer's mind to have the

showdown now. Suddenly Geyer hit Stuart in the chest with the flat of his hand and jolted him back on his heels.

"You don't look as if you got half the nerve your father didn't have!" Geyer yelled.

BEN STUART leaped in fast and clubbed Geyer on the jaw and felt pain run up to the shoulder of his right arm from the impact. Geyer staggered back until he was nearly through the batwing doors and then set himself and rushed in. Stuart swung both fists and connected with one but Geyer broke through his guard and caught him on the side of the head and he vaguely wondered what kind of a skull he had when he found himself still on his feet near the bar.

Men scattered when Geyer tried to pin him there, and the man used his head and his knees in close. Sick from the pain of one of the foul thrusts, Stuart fought crazily to get clear and, managing to get an arm loose, he cracked Geyer behind the left ear. Some of the strength left the foreman long enough to permit Stuart to get out onto the floor, and when Geyer charged, he brought a fist around in a short arc and landed it flush against the man's jaw. Geyer crashed over a table, came up, a bottle clutched in his hand.

Ben Stuart ducked and the bottle sailed over the bar and smashed Duchain's big mirror. Geyer, blood streaming down his face, hurled himself forward but Stuart rolled free, jumped to his feet and gestured for his man to get up.

"Come on, Geyer! Don't tell me that's all you got!"

"I'll kill you, Stuart!" Geyer raged, and drove in once more. Stuart sidestepped and hooked the man solidly in the jaw and buckled his legs under him. He moved in and hit Geyer three times, and with a gash over his left eye, Sanderson's man catapulted back against the bar and fought to get his breath.

He shook blood out of his eyes and bared his teeth, and turned quickly to pick up a six-gun a man had put on the bar for him. Stuart knew he would never bridge the gap before a bullet tore through him, but he had to make the try. He was going forward when somebody fired from the crowd and Geyer dropped the Colt and slapped his left hand over the wrist of his right, and turned drunkenly to see who had thrown down on him.

Kel Duchain stepped up, his gun still in his hand.

"He had you licked fair and square, Mott," the gambler said quietly. "I wouldn't stand by and let my own brother pull one out of his sleeve. You owe me for that mirror."

There was approval of Duchain's part in this in the hum of talk coming from the crowd, and Geyer checked a reply that had formed on his swollen lips. He flayed Duchain with his eyes instead.

Ben Stuart said, "Geyer, get your things at the Rockin' H tonight and clear out."

Geyer turned around near the batwings and quickly his eyes were drawn to something going on behind Stuart. The puncher turned slowly and he saw Kel Duchain solicitously put an arm around Roxanna's soft shoulders and take her toward the back of the room. Stuart looked at Geyer again and suddenly he knew that he was not the only man in Piedmont who'd have to be careful in the dark, during the days to come.

Early the next day Stuart concluded his business with Kirkman. Bull Sanderson sat in, plainly showing the effects of the account of the happenings of the night before, and avoiding Stuart's eyes. If he harbored the slightest regrets, if there was a modicum of respect in him for the man who'd clubbed Geyer down, he gave no sign of either.

"That clears everything, Ben," the lawyer said. "Even to twenty-five hundred against amortizing. Good luck to you."

"You'll wish to blazes you stayed away," Bull Sanderson snarled.

"You can occupy the ranchhouse," Stuart said unfeelingly. "I'll get along with the boys in the bunkhouse. I haven't been used to easy livin'. You have any advice I think is sound, I'll welcome it, Sanderson."

"You're on your own, Stuart!" the fiery old rancher snapped. "You can stew in your own juice."

A half hour later, Ben Stuart rode out of Piedmont and half way there suddenly yanked his horse to a walk and thought, That's what it was. Geyer never paid for those drinks. The barkeep didn't press

him. I must think to ask Kirkman a question. He kept riding, picking up familiar landmarks, and recognizing the contours of the surrounding terrain.

Coming to a divergent road he stopped to look at an ancient tree that had served advertisers and sheriffs as a billboard for many years. It also marked the short cut to the Rocking H. Nearly an hour later he came to the rotting plank bridge spanning Bedloe Creek and let his horse drink before he crossed it.

There was a blessed quiet here, the only sound being the cool water rushing over the gravelly bottom, and he got to wondering why man was born to steal and murder and lie.

He crossed the water-course and rode up an incline to the brow of a pine-studded knoll and reaching it he heard her call his name.

SALLY BONNER came out of the pines on a blue roan, and she wore a cowman's hat and dungarees, a gray woolen shirt and soft leather half-boots.

"Ben," she called again. He tipped his hat and drew rein and let her swing her bronc in close. "I acted pretty rotten last night. There was no excuse for it. Please don't hold it against me."

"You had your reason," Ben Stuart said. "Let me tell you what it was. Because of the Stuart's, your father is tied to a wheelchair. He got shot in the back doing my father's work. No," he told her when she tried to interrupt, "let me finish. Your father was Harry Stuart's best friend and I guess he didn't bother to try and fight the sickness he got while he thought of Jim Bonner cut down to half a man. He's better off than your father, Sally, but he'd come back and take his place if he could."

"It takes women longer to understand some things than it does men," the girl said. "Don't you believe I'm really sorry for last night?"

She was like a child asking forgiveness. Ben Stuart could see the little scar near one corner of her mouth and it carried him back to the day she had fallen off a Rocking H fence and cut herself on a piece of sharp stone. He had laughed at her and she had picked up the stone and had thrown it at him. A brat then, a beautiful woman now. Ben Stuart knew what was happening to him here and he did not mind.

He said, "Of course I believe it. A Bonner's word is good enough for me."

"You're staying on, Ben?"

"Aim to make a try," he said. "I got a legal hold on the Rocking H, that's about all. And there's Bull Sanderson—"

"Why, Ben? Why does a man fight his own flesh and blood? It isn't—human."

"There are men who have to have control of the souls and fortunes of those tied to them, Sally," Ben Stuart said. "Sanderson is a martinet and wants to rule the roost. If he can't do it with his will, he'll do it with a gun."

"My father said he'd never control you, Ben," Sally said, and Stuart warmed at the proud ring in her voice. "But please be careful. And we expect you to supper next Sunday night."

"I don't know what could keep me from it, Sally," Ben said, and he saw the color fill her tanned cheeks before she could wheel her horse away. He waited until he could no longer hear the beat of hoofs, then continued on to the Rocking H, more ready than ever for the rough work ahead.

A quarter of a mile from the ranch buildings he felt the tension building up and quickly planned his first move. He wondered how many of the old hands were there, like Lige Burkout, and how many had been hired by Mott Geyer. Coming across the triangular meadow across the road from the Rocking H gate he saw that the buildings had been kept in good repair, and he also saw a dozen men loafing around the yard. They watched him ride in, appraising him carefully, and he let his own eyes wander to pick out faces that should be familiar to him.

Stuart pulled up near the corral and stared four men out of countenance. He yelled for all to hear:

"Whose birthday are you gents celebratin'? Get on your horses and go out and earn your pay! I'm Ben Stuart if you're curious, and I'm boss of this spread."

A small hook-nosed man spat into the dirt. "We take our orders from Sanderson. Up to this time of day he ain't seen fit to give us any."

Ben Stuart got out of the saddle. "Geyer get his stuff and drift?"

A heavy-set man nodded. A half a

dozen punchers came out of the bunkhouse and stood by.

"Then you follow him," Ben Stuart said. "All of you who don't figure to take orders from me. Get what's due you and rope your broncs, and be out of here by noon. That plain?"

The hook-nosed man glanced at those around him and grinned. "When Sanderson fires us, we'll drift and not before."

Stuart dropped the man with a heavy right to the jaw and took a backward step, drawing his gun.

"All right, let's settle it in a hurry!" he roared, and saw a tall puncher with a heavy mustache clear his Colt to back him up. He got his show on hands then, for and against, and a slant-eyed, moon-faced man said:

"Come on, boys. We'll go up and see the old man."

LIGE BURKOUT came up to Ben Stuart, grinning wide, and his hands outstretched. "A sight for sore eyes, son. Heard what you did to Geyer in town last night. You can count on an even dozen to stay, Ben."

"You're the new foreman as of now, Lige," Stuart said, and took his bronc to the corral and stripped it of its gear and turned it loose. He carried his stuff toward the bunkhouse where he picked his bed, Burkout and his men filing in behind him.

"How much stuff we own out there, Lige?" Stuart asked when he'd spread his blankets.

"Half of what you ought to have," Burkout said evasively. "You've already heard your pa—"

Stuart nodded, became silent. He went to the bunkhouse door to watch the ranchhouse. Less that fifteen minutes later the men Geyer had put on the payroll straggled away from Sanderson's veranda and came to the bunkhouse to gather their belongings. The moon-faced rider said on his way out:

"You win for now, mister. You beat Geyer with your fists. You still got to try with a gun."

"I'll remember not to turn my back to him," Stuart snapped. "I've got no quarrel with any of you men. If you want to stay on my conditions, you're free to do so."

Two of the men chose to stay on. After the others had ridden away, Stuart took a long deep breath, tightened his heavy belt a notch, and walked up to the ranchhouse.

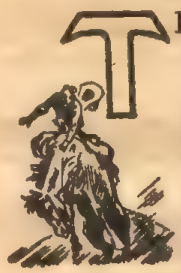
Bull Sanderson was sitting by the cold fireplace in the big living room when Stuart walked in, and the old man's eyes betrayed the tumult within him.

"Come up to look at the books," Stuart said. "And to check the calf count. I've instructed Burkout to take on some new men. Lige is the new foreman."

Bull Sanderson snapped, "Stick your nose any place you please, Stuart!" and got up and snatched up his hat. He went out and closed the door quietly behind him and Stuart knew he would have felt easier if Sanderson had slammed it.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Shots in the Palace*



THE records showed approximately nine thousand head on the Rocking H, according to Sanderson's antiquated bookkeeping methods. The calf count was better than normal and some of the discouragement drained out of Stuart. He looked around the room and the lack of a woman's touch was glaringly evident, and so he thought of Sally Bonner. I have no right to throw my rope too soon, he admitted grimly. Right now I'm a bad risk.

Stuart spent the next two days looking over his holdings and toward the third night turned his mind to the shooting of Jim Bonner and the theft of ten thousand dollars and tried to fit Bull Sanderson into the crooked pattern. Watching Lige Burkout direct the building of a new line cabin in a coulee, seven miles from the home ranch, he said:

"Lige, you ever meet George LaMannа?"

The new foreman said, "Only one time, Ben. Can't say as I could recognize him if I fell over him an hour from now."

Stuart was silent for awhile and began to feel the urge to go to Piedmont.

He said, "Spread some salt on the Aspen meadows before you ride back, Lige. I'll be back late, so tell Chips never mind settin' my plate."

"Take two men with you, Ben."

Stuart grinned. "I'll be careful, Lige. I'll be all right, don't fret."

He rode across the tawny flats and up to a ridge, cut through heavy woodland and down onto a plateau where Rocking H cattle grazed, and just before twilight came out onto the stage road where it had been gouged through a sandy bank a few miles from Piedmont. He rode for another half mile and then swung his horse aside to let a surrey pass.

Holding the reins of the sleek livery team was Mott Geyer and sitting beside the man was the girl from the Palace. He tipped his hat and met Geyer's stony glance for a long moment, then sat his saddle quietly and watched the surrey until it was out of sight, and the dust kicked up by its wheels had scattered to nothingness.

Stuart wondered if Kel Duchain knew about this, and he felt that he knew how much Sanderson paid a foreman for a month's work and subtracted from the amount the cost of hiring such a rig. There was little doubt in Stuart's mind as he rode on into town that Geyer might have made little deals of his own while in Sanderson's pay and so was in no hurry to catch on with another cattle outfit.

When he got into Piedmont, Stuart went to see Kirkman first thing and asked the lawyer if he did not know most of what went on in the town. Kirkman leaned back in his chair, allowing that he did.

"Maybe you could give me an idea how Duchain makes out at the Palace, Kirkman," Stuart said.

The lawyer studied the puncher for a moment. "A funny question, Ben," he finally said. "Well, there was a time when he did all the business of that kind in town. While he was away, clearin' up some trouble with his lungs, competition moved in. Caddo Heenan opened that saloon on Northwest and cut into Kel's business. I guess Kel paid some doctors a full year's profit. Duchain went to the bank but it's commonly known that Jake Parslow is a mossback, a temperance crank, and he turned Kel down. How you gettin' on with Sanderson?"

Stuart said, "The old hellion's too quiet lately, Kirkman. I don't like that much. Thanks for the information."

"It's been my experience," the lawyer said, "that a man can pry too much."

"I'll bear that in mind," Stuart said on his way out.

After a steak at the restaurant he went over to Duchain's place and stepped up to the almost deserted bar and had one drink which he used up slowly. Five men sat around a table close to the empty stage and were playing poker. The man facing the door was Kel Duchain.

Stuart sauntered over and watched the play and became aware that the gambler's eyes were too bright and his fingers were clumsy when he riffled the cards. His mind was not on the game but on the view of the street visible through the big window.

After ten minutes of this, Duchain swept a small stack of chips off the table and said he'd had enough, and walked out of the Palace and took his stand on the edge of the walk.

A man growled, "I smell trouble, friends. That gent is primed and ready to blow wide open. A man of his trade seldom drinks that much of the stuff he sells."

THERE was a parallel here, Stuart thought as he waited around. Sanderson has not made a move against me because he is afraid of what I have on him, and Duchain stands by and lets Mott Geyer take Roxanna driving, the man he'd plugged with a six-gun a few nights ago. It was a night to stir a woman's blood if she thought favorably of her escort, and Geyer was not an ugly tempered man by any manner of means. Duchain was out there suffering worse than physical pain and he'd looked on his way out as if he ached to do something he was afraid to do.

Just after the lamps went on in Duchain's Stuart saw the surrey draw up in front and he went out and feigned interest in a bandsaw displayed in the window of the hardware store next door.

He heard Duchain say in a small voice, "You have a pleasant ride, ma'am?" and turned slightly to look at Geyer.

"Wasn't that she didn't draw so many customers here, Kel," Geyer said, "I wouldn't brought her back."

"So?" Duchain said almost inaudibly and Stuart saw his right hand double into a fist and press against his thigh. "I wouldn't go that far if I was you, Geyer."

The girl hurried into the Palace, quickly

collapsing her frilled parasol as if afraid there would be a scene here, and Duchain whirled and followed her in. Mott Geyer laughed at the clattering batwing doors and stepped up to the surrey and drove it to the stable. He loked back at Stuart, his mocking grin gone from his face.

Ben Stuart walked up the street knowing that it would be worth his while to find out why Mott Geyer had free run of the Palace and why he was the only man sure he wouldn't get a bullet in his brain paying court to Roxanna.

He stopped in front of the lodge hall to look at a poster and immediately became concerned with gentler thoughts. There was a dance here next Wednesday night and he would ask Sally about it when he went to the Bonner's for supper. He wondered how long it had been since either of them had really had some fun. Swinging back toward Duchain's he saw three riders angling toward him and instantly became alert. Lige Burkout's voice slackened him. "You got no sense at all, Ben? You stick close to the lights."

"What's bitin' you, Lige?"

The puncher dropped off his horse, ran a big knuckle along the fringe of his mustache. "Bull Sanderson rode away this afternoon and was packed for more than a short trip. I wondered when he'd start movin' against you, Ben."

"We'll be ready for him," Stuart said.

A little Rocking H rider said, "We stopped in at Heenan's to get a drink, Stuart. There was a man there I saw one time before and all you have to do is look at his hands. Name he goes by is Vidal, that's all. I've heard his fee comes mighty high."

Ben Stuart grinned but he felt as if the buildings on either side of the main street were closing in on him and that a pair of eyes watched him from each window. He must be sure he would dance with Sally before it was too late.

He said, "Let's be moving along home, Lige."

"Figure we could use half a dozen more men we can trust, Ben," the foreman said on the way to the Rocking H. "If Bull figures on gunning us out like the old days, we got to be ready."

"How strong is the law enforcement, Lige?"

"Koch likes to be lookin' the other way when a ruckus starts, Ben. Where was he the night you tangled with Geyer?" . . .

The lodge hall was decked out in festive regalia on Wednesday night, and Ben Stuart forgot all of the world outside as he danced to the music of a three piece orchestra with Sally Bonner is his arms. Her hair, brushing his cheek, reminded him of wild roses and sweet clover, and in the soft eyes looking up at him he read the pattern of his future. But when the music stopped he watched a change come over her face and now her eyes seemed fearful that his stay on the Rocking H would be of short duration. He felt the pressure of her hand on his arm and he tried to make light of her fears.

"I am not a child any longer, Ben," she said. "You have seen what happened to my father for working against Bull Sanderson. People have said there is no man alive he hasn't broken if he deemed it necessary to gain his ends."

"That old hellion?" Stuart said. "I've got some of his blood and bone in me, don't forget. I've got to square up for Jim Bonner or my father won't rest much in his grave. No harm will come to you, Sally."

"No?"

SUDDEN pain came to her eyes. It mixed with the tears that started, and quickly she turned away and ran from him. He shouldered his way through the dancing couples when the music started and finally found her sitting on a bench near the window. He looked down at her for a moment and then leaned over and touched her hand.

"This is a waltz, Sally. It is the one that's just right for what I have to say to you."

He said it a few moments later, his chin buried in her hair. She did not look up or make a sound but he felt her hand press softly against his shoulder.

"You were a brat," he chided. "Who'd ever think it would all turn out like this. We haven't much say, Sally. It's a pattern planned out way ahead."

"It's all right, Ben," she said softly as the strains of the waltz trailed off. "Somehow I'm not afraid, any more."

During an intermission, Lige Burkout came over to where Stuart sat with Sally and made a wry face. "They call that a

drink, that grape juice and water, Ben. I was figurin' maybe you'd want to join me, but—no, guess you wouldn't."

"Why don't you go along with him, Ben?" Sally suggested. "One drink never hurt anyone. There's a handsome drummer who's been wanting me to dance with him for an hour."

"Now, I know you're the woman for me," Stuart said with a grin, and followed his foreman out of the crowded hall and down the flight of wooden stairs.

They went over to Duchain's and found the bar lined solid and Roxanna just finishing a song. Stuart was about to call for a drink when he saw the thin man standing at the foot of the stairs leading to the rooms above. He wore a tied-down gun holster and his slim hands were building a cigarette. His eyes were sharp and cold and Stuart could not be sure they were looking directly at him or beyond him. Lige Burkout nudged him and he jumped nervously.

"Your drink, Ben."

The place was filled with a racket that made Stuart's nerves sing and while Lige had a second whisky he watched Duchain's percentage girls work the men at the tables and realized all the more how precious Sally was to him. A Rocking H rider brushed against him and said softly, "That's Vidal, Stuart," just as the muffled roar of a six-gun came from somewhere above. Burkout's drink spilled down the front of his shirt and the racket in the Palace dwindled to a wondering ripple of sound. Another shot followed.

"Where's Duchain?" Stuart yelled. He hurried toward the stairs, and the man known as Vidal walked slowly toward the swinging doors.

Stuart swung around and said to Lige, "Go and look out for Sally. I won't be long."

He had his foot on the first carpeted tread when the girl, Roxanna, came down the stairs. Her eyes were wide with fright.

"Please hurry," she cried out. "There's been an accident."

"Get a doctor," Stuart flung at the men pressing toward the staircase. "And bring the sheriff with him." He ran up the stairs.

"First room on the left, mister," the dark-haired songstress said. When he bolted into the big room that was Duchain's living quarters he heard her scream, "Go back! We don't want the whole town in here."

Kel Duchain was slumped in an overstuffed chair and blood trickled down the side of his neck. Part of his ear was a bloody wreck.

The gambler said, "Blast it, Stuart, I have heard of a man shooting himself like this. I held the six-gun up to see if the barrel was clean—"

"There were two shots," Stuart said.

"You must be mistaken, my friend. You heard the echo of the one nicked me," Duchain said, and Roxanna quickly sat down beside him and held a handkerchief to his bleeding head.

Koch, the sheriff, and Piedmont's doctor came in ahead of three other men. Koch turned and ordered the curious out in the hall to clear out and go downstairs. Ben Stuart threw a leg over a heavy marble-topped table and watched the doctor attend to Duchain.

"Close call, Duchain," the medical man said. "Your ear won't look the same. How the devil a man can be careless with guns!"

Stuart caught Roxanna's glance and the woman quickly turned her head away. The sheriff examined Duchain's six-gun and was satisfied. He said, "I'm not needed here," and left the room. Stuart kept searching with his eyes and finally he saw something on the floor near a window. The doctor applied gauze to Duchain's wound, picked up his bag.

"That's five dollars, Kel, when you get around to it," the doctor said.

"Thanks, Doc," Duchain answered, and grinned ruefully at Stuart. "Roxanna, you've got a song comin' up about now. Business has to go on."

The woman hesitated. "You're sure you'll be all right, Kel?" She put a hand on the man's shoulder and Stuart knew now that Geyer had no fair chance here.

"Sure, honey," Duchain said. "Do like I say."

NEXT ISSUE

INJUN HATE

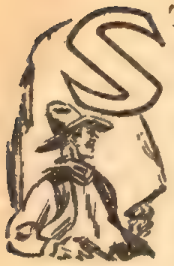
*A Novelet by*

JOHNSTON McCULLEY

AND MANY OTHER STORIES

## CHAPTER V

### *Killer's Mistake*



STUART waited for five minutes after Roxanna had left the room before he went over and picked up the stub of a cigarette. He held it in his palm for Duchain to see.

"You're a cigar smoker, Kel. Does the girl smoke cigarettes? If she does, I'm sure she'd show better manners in her way of gettin' rid of 'em."

"She doesn't!" Duchain said, and his temper flared. "You have been actin pretty high-handed since you come here to this town, Stuart. Get out of here!"

"Easy," Stuart said. "If a man was on my side I wouldn't kick him downstairs. Maybe I forgot to thank you for that shot you threw at Geyer the other night, but it's been in my mind. Duchain, you know Geyer didn't come here to pay you for that. You're in a pocket, friend. I think you play it square all the way and, if you are in a mess, you didn't ask for it. If you aren't, Kel, why do you let a man take that girl out ridin' in a fancy livery rig when you eat your heart out while she's gone. There were two shots, Duchain."

"And if there was?" Duchain chewed nervously at his cigar and seemed to be trying to make sure of Ben Stuart.

"Then I'll draw you a picture, Kel. Geyer came up here and made you a proposition. Most likely he demanded. He held most of the cards and your only argument was in your six-gun. He got to you first and creased you, Kel. When your head stopped spinning, you had to think fast, so you fired a shot out of the window."

Duchain did not speak but Stuart knew he had hit it nearly perfect. From below came the sound of Roxanna's voice and Duchain suddenly dropped his head in his hands and let pent-up breath sough out. Stuart suddenly turned and moved toward the back of the house, went into a kitchen where a lamp with a turned down wick was burning, a six-gun in his hand.

He jumped to a window and looked out and wondered if he imagined a movement in the darkness of an areaway. He found the door and went through it and onto a small porch and touched the tips of his fingers lightly to the flimsy bannister stringing down with the flight of wooden steps. He was sure something had caused them to shake.

He went back inside the house and found Duchain pacing the floor and there was a sag to the man's shoulders. Stuart dropped onto a horsehair sofa.

"Duchain, the pocket you're in concerns me, I'm sure of it," he said. "I began to think when I saw Geyer have his drinks downstairs and forget to pay, and he was not reminded. What is this hold he has on you? You can keep it to yourself and get smashed and let Geyer take Roxanna with him."

Duchain stiffened, snatched the long cigar from his teeth and threw it against the wall. He faced Ben Stuart, his face as gray as the marble adorning his table.

"Stuart, I have to trust someone. That woman means more to me than life itself and to save me she'd go with that crooked devil." He went over to the window and slammed it down and made sure the door to the back stairs was barred. Ben Stuart became aware of the disquiet in himself and made a smoke to steady his nerves. He had to stop thinking of Sally.

Kel Duchain sat down and faced Stuart. "If a man finds out I've told you this, you'll never leave town alive, mister," he said. "Yes, I'm sure this concerns you, Stuart. I—" He swung his head around when a knock came on the door. "Roxanna?"

"Yes, Kel." She came in quietly. "I saw Geyer ride up to the hotel just a minute ago." She suddenly realized Stuart was there and paled, and clamped a hand to her mouth.

"That's all right, honey," Duchain said. "Stuart, he is a smart devil and he moved fast after he got out of here. Must have had his horse at the edge of town."

"Then I didn't see or hear him out there, Kel," the owner of the Rocking H said. "Gettin' so I'm seein' things and jumpin' at shadows." He was wondering: Who was out there? Stuart stared at the carpet at his feet and heard Duchain talking softly to Roxanna. The door closed and he looked up. Duchain came over and sat down, facing him.

"I had tough sleddin' for awhile, Stuart," the gambler said. "After that

sickness the bills piled up. I had to look for some ready cash but the bank considered me a bad risk—morally. The word got around and then one day Mott Geyer came in. He had nine one-thousand dollar bills."

GRIMLY Stuart nodded his head. "Then I played the right hunch, Kel? He tell you where he got them?"

"Twelve years savin's, he said, and a legacy from an aunt in Texas," Duchain said. "Wasn't until later I heard why Jim Bonner was crippled and that Bonner had carried ten one-thousand-dollar bills on him. Too late, then."

"Why was it, Duchain?"

"I'll tell you. Tonight he came to get his money back, but I told him it had been used up to pay those debts and he'd have to wait until he got it out of the profits. That wasn't what he wanted. He insisted I sell out and give him his share and right away I knew why. Roxanna. Stuart, when a man wants a woman bad enough he'll go to the limit to get her and will ruin himself to stop her from belongin' to another."

"I can believe that," Stuart said. "You went a little crazy and pulled, your gun, but he was faster."

Duchain nodded. "All I had in my mind was to kill him, Stuart. He told Roxanna, when he took her ridin', he would tie me up in the shootin' and robbery of Bonner if she didn't go away with him. She knows what jail would do to a man with my lungs—and she loves me, Stuart. I know it."

"Sure. By the time a sheriff had a letter enclosin' a receipt for nine thousand dollars in your handwritin'. Geyer would be practically across the border or on a ship out of 'Frisco. You are in deep, Kel."

"As deep as you, Stuart?"

The rancher grinned and asked for the time. Duchain's watch said a half hour after midnight, and Stuart jumped up.

"There's somethin' I have to do, Kel." He hurried out of the room and down the stairs and found that the Palace was getting ready to close.

Three punchers lingered at the bar and swampers were dousing the lights and clearing the tables and chairs to make room for the mops. He went through the swinging doors and up the street to the lodge hall where the dance had broken up. A buckboard was leaving the edge of the wide walk. "There he is, ma'am," Lige Burkout snapped and hauled in on the reins.

Sally was not angry with him, he saw. She seemed immensely relieved to see him alive and he wished the night could end right here.

"I had no time to send excuses, Sally. Ran into somethin' concerned me and it will need my attention a mite longer. Wait until I get my horse and I'll ride out with you a ways."

Lige said tightly. "I can get a man to drive this team, Ben. No tellin' what'll happen."

"You'll see the lady safe home, Lige," Ben Stuart countered, an irritated sharpness in his voice.

The buckboard waited there until Stuart had his horse saddled and bridled, and only two lights burned in Piedmont when Lige got the team in motion. Stuart rode close and wondered how he would fit in the pattern three or four hours from now, and he remembered how it had been to have this girl in his arms. He became aware of the indecision stirring within him and the consideration of the conseqences of a return to Piedmont and knew he had better not ride with Lige and Sally too far.

He thought: When a thing has to be done a man can't forever put it off. Men like Bull Sanderson would not wait too long. Two miles out of town he said:

"Tell your father I'll try and stop by late tomorrow afternoon, Sally. I'm mighty sorry our fun was busted up right in the middle."

Lige said with deep feeling, "I wish you luck, Ben."

"It's all right, Ben," the girl said. "I think I understand. Tomorrow then." The last two words caught in her throat and she dropped her head. "Let's hurry, Lige," she said as Stuart wheeled his horse around.

Stuart rode slowly back toward Piedmont, and half-circled less than a mile out. He came into the west side of town and was thankful for the thin mist that helped make the dark thicker.

He left his horse in an alley, came out onto the main street and walked quietly to the hotel.

ONE light burned in the cubbyhole where a little fat man sat, and it bothered Stuart a little when he discovered the clerk was awake.

"No room here," the man said.

"I'm not stayin' over," Stuart said and felt a crawling sensation along his spine. "What room does Mott Geyer have?"

"Number Nineteen, mister. I don't guess he'll want to be disturbed."

"You guessed right," a voice said, and then Geyer came through a door in back and stepped into the lobby. "I kind of expected you, Stuart." Sanderson's one-time foreman was dressed in a tight-fitting pale blue shirt and levis tucked into half-boots. He wore a gun. "I paid a man a high price to keep close to you. You've had a talk with Kel Duchain."

Stuart thought, This is the showdown. No sense in fencing with words.

"Figure you're right, Geyer," he said, and balanced himself right. "I know all I need to know."

"Well, let's finish this, Stuart," Geyer said, and then there was a movement on the stairs. Stuart saw a man there and knew at once who he was although the lines of his face were in shadow. Geyer laughed softly. The fat man ducked out of sight.

"There's too much rabbit in you, Geyer," Stuart snapped. "You want to play it mighty sure. Yes, you shot Jim Bonner in the back. And you, Vidal, this how you got your reputation? You didn't have the nerve to come for me alone?"

"Five hundred dollars is no good if a man can't spend it, Stuart," Vidal said stonily.

Geyer said, "Make your try to get out of this, Stuart! Words won't do it!"

A lot of the past and the present ran with lightning swiftness through Stuart's mind. He had seconds in which to live and knew where he'd throw his first shot at Mott Geyer. The face of Sally Bonner was limned clear for a moment inside his head and when he struck for his gun he thought of what might have been.

The Colt was clear of leather when a shot boomed somewhere overhead and as he fired, Vidal pitched headlong down the stairs. Geyer stumbled forward, widened eyes fixed upon the gunman he'd hired, and blood staining the front of his shirt.

Stuart abstractedly felt the numbness crawling up his left leg when Geyer crashed to the floor, his gun sliding away from his fingers.

Stuart looked up the stairs and saw the powder smoke boiling down and he marveled: I am alive. It is over and they're both dead.

He made it to a table and braced himself, and watched the grim figure coming down the stairs. Now he doubted that he'd come through this. The man wore a cowhide vest and old corduroy pants tucked into high leather boots. He had a spade beard and he carried a six-gun in his hand.

BULL SANDERSON shoved a dead man aside with his boot and then looked at Stuart.

"Always said you Stuarts never had much sense. Didn't nobody ever tell you snakes sometimes travel in pairs?" He glared scornfully at his grandson who thought he saw a small trace of respect in a pair of old and sharp eyes. "Mighty handy with that gun, ain't you?"

"There's something in Geyer's pocket I got to get, Sanderson," Stuart said, and felt of his left leg just below the hip and brought his hand away stained with blood. "It'll prove who shot Jim Bonner and robbed him of ten thousand dollars."

"Where in the blasted blue blazes you think I've been lately, you fool?" Sanderson roared, and the sheriff came in with two men and came up short as he saw the bodies on the floor. "Suspicioned Geyer right along and that he could have been tipped off by a polecat named LaManna. That cattle dealer has four busted ribs and won't be up and around for about a month. On my way back I heard a gunman was in Piedmont. Got in about two hours ago, Ben, and I been close to the killer every second. Done some cat-walkin' by night many times myself. I sneaked in the back way to call on Mott Geyer myself, and it was lucky for you."

"Vidal," Sheriff Koch gasped, when he turned the gunman over on his back.

"Maybe you expected it might of been Lily Langtree, Sheriff?" Bull Sanderson snorted, and waved Stuart back when the puncher limped toward Geyer's corpse. "That's the sheriff's business, Ben. Koch, go through that man's pockets and we'll show you why he's dead and prove to you who shot Jim Bonner in the back. Go

ahead, if you can get the goods on a bad-man when he's already dead."

KOCH growled at the old man's inference as he went over the dead man's effects. He drew a leather wallet from inside Geyer's shirt and examined the contents. He finally handed Bull Sanderson a soiled strip of paper that had been folded four ways. The old man scanned the words scratched by Duchain's pen.

"Acknowledgment of nine thousand dollars invested in the Palace by Mott Geyer and signed by Duchain," he said. "Kel must've had an idea where it come from."

"Not at the time," Stuart said. "I've talked to Kel." He managed to get to a big armchair and fell into it, and knew he was losing too much blood.

Bull Sanderson roared: "Can't you see this galoot's been shot? Get the doctor, you blockheads!"

Stuart still wasn't quite sure. All this was not real enough. Sanderson wouldn't want him to live. He'd want him to die. The old hellion wouldn't shoot down a gunman who was ready to do a job he'd set for himself. He looked at Vidal and at Geyer, both surely dead, and he told himself, I can't see myself on the floor so I must be alive. I'm something solid and not a ghost.

Bull Sanderson suddenly laughed. "The Rockin' H has got a nine-thousand-dollar investment in the Palace, Ben. Figure we can have a lot of fun there until it's used up." He snorted with disgust. "Why did it have to happen when I got this old?"

Things began to spin around. The scared fat man behind the desk. Vidal and Geyer. The man coming in carrying the valise. Sanderson sounded as if he'd gone out into the street when he yelled:

"There's your patient. Patch him up good, Doc!"

Suddenly there was no more light. . . .

Sometime later, Ben Stuart realized that he was in bed and he saw Bull Sanderson and Kel Duchain sitting at a small table playing cards. He heard Kel say:

"When a man's been so blasted ornery and unreasonable as you for so many years, I figure it'll take plenty of grit to say what you got to—to Ben Stuart, Bull."

"Close your big mouth, Kel," the old man ripped out. "What you think I been tryin' to think up the last hour? It wa'n't how to beat a slippery hombre like you at cards you was already shufflin' when you hived up in a cradle. It's goin' to take a heap of thinkin', Kel, and it'll near kill me to admit certain things are true about myself. First day Ben come back something busted loose inside me and my head started clearin'—"

"You taste the meaness comin' out of you, Bull?" Duchain thrust at the old rancher.

"Wonder if he'll give me a chance, Kel?"

Duchain said, gathering up the cards and some of Bull's money, "Don't think I would."

"Me and that young feller could build the Rockin' H up even bigger'n Harry dreamed about, Kel. We might even git Jim Bonner on his feet ag'in."

Ben Stuart grinned up at the ceiling. He hoped it was possible for the dead to hear what those left behind them had to say. There was nothing now to stand between him and Sally and he'd find something out for sure when she came to visit him. He opened one eye and looked out of the window and saw that the sky was getting pink and bright. He turned his head to the side and called out:

"Will yuh shut up, Gramp? How do you think a man can get any rest?"

Old Bull Sanderson dropped his cards in his lap and let his jaw sag. He looked at Kel Duchain and his old features became all scrambled by a wide and delighted grin.

"All right, Ben," he said, then lowered his voice to a whisper and glared at Duchain. "Deal 'em now, you old crook. I'm goin to beat the pants off you!"

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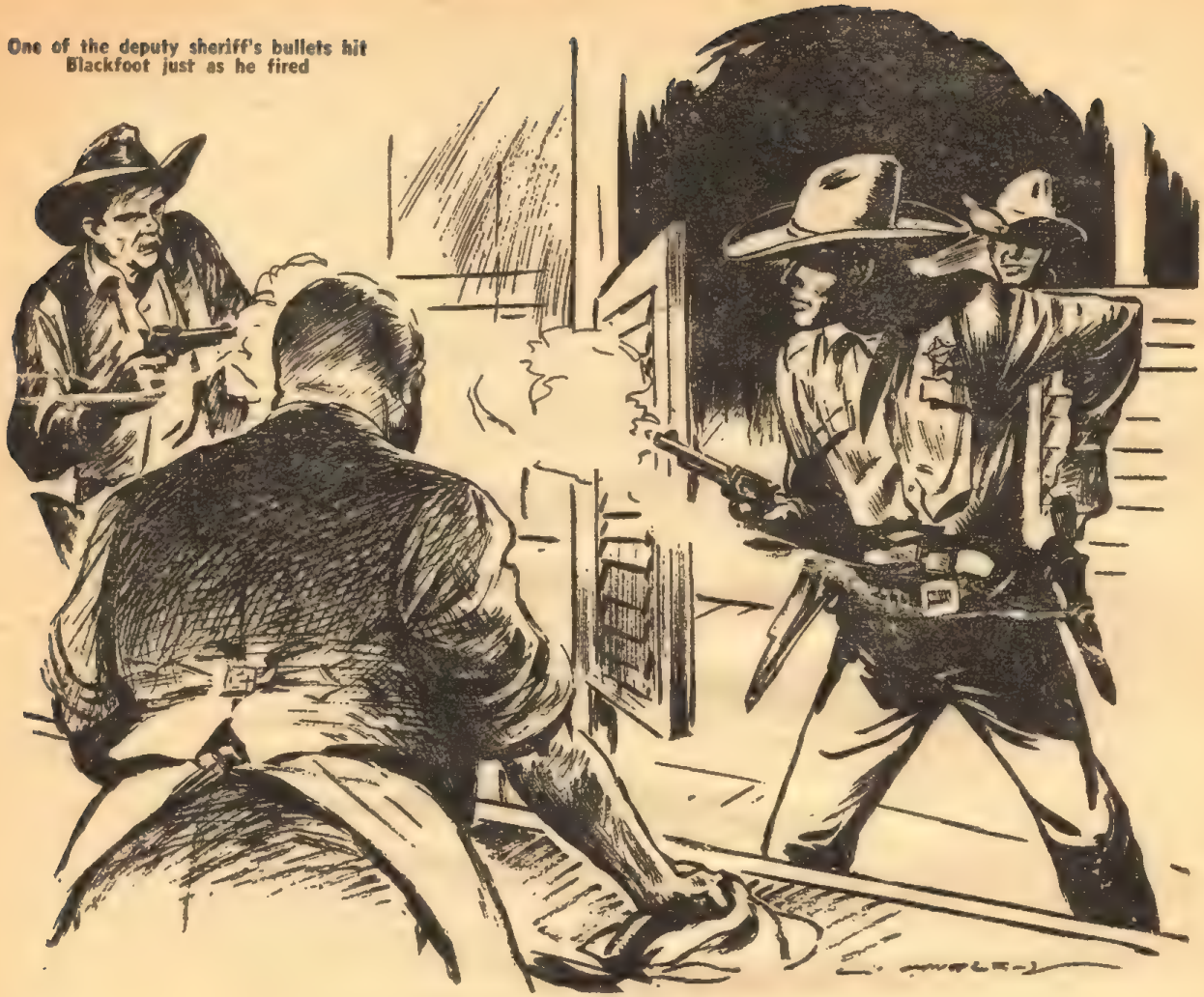

One of the deputy sheriff's bullets hit Blackfoot just as he fired

# Reunion at Amigo

## By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

HE STOOD at the far end of the bar and drank in solitude, a lonely old man with a gray face and a gnarled thin form like a post oak. His eyes were bleak and suspicious, and faded from age and from too much sun. His battered black Stetson was pushed back off a red, bald forehead. He had come to Amigo to find his son whom he had not seen in thirty years.

Although he had been christened Ezra Harper almost sixty years before, he had not used nor heard himself called that name since he first exchanged it for a prison number. Those few who did know him knew only that he was called "Blackfoot," and those who had tried to inquire further into the matter had got their ears chewed off and learned nothing, judges and sheriffs included.

Now, in the early evening, in the only saloon in Amigo, he stood at the far end of the bar, out of the circle of light made by the lone hanging kerosene lamp, and

*The outlaw called "Blackfoot" comes to visit his son!*

drank morosely, his frosty eyes watching the place gradually filling up with range men coming in to make a night of it. Here he might get a lead on his son.

He tapped on the bar with a silver half-dollar and, when the bartender came to refill his glass, he asked in a voice that did not carry very far, but which was not intended to be furtive.

"Wouldn't happen to know a young feller around here by the name of Dick Harper, would you?"

The bartender removed a well-chewed cigar butt from his fat mouth and smiled. "Dick Harper? Sure. He'll be around tonight more'n likely. I'll tell him."

"No," answered old Blackfoot quickly. "It wasn't that important. I'd rather you didn't."

The bartender's bright eyes opened wisely, then quickly went back to normal.

"Sure," he said. "But if you just wanted to spot him, you'll probably hear folks callin' him Dick. He'll be around."

A call for service interrupted him. He left it at that and went on down to serve a group of three men who had already emptied a quart between them. One of the men who had been boasting of his horsemanship, had been throwing an occasional furtive glance at Blackfoot for half an hour, and now he leaned over the bar, and staring straight toward Blackfoot, he whispered loudly to the bartender. Blackfoot, a full fifteen feet away from him, could hear most of what he said.

"Know who that hombre is?" came in an alcoholic whisper.

The bartender shook his head. "Never seen him before."

"He's that outlaw, Blackfoot, sure's you're born. Must've broke out of prison."

BLACKFOOT felt an old familiar tingling in his face and arms, like cat's fur rising at a hint of danger, and his hand on the bar slid from the whisky glass downward toward his thigh, where a forty-four was holstered and tied down. His sad eyes never left his whisky glass. He picked it up with his other hand and drained it.

A man farther down the bar caught the word "Blackfoot," looked at the old man, and then walked over to a table and whispered. That was the way the word spread, until every voice in the saloon was hushed, and twenty faces were turned toward the old man.

Blackfoot stood at the shadowy end of the bar, tense, like an animal ready to spring forward and fight—or run. Blackfoot's old legs were stiff and saddle weary, but he shifted his feet under him until he was in good balance.

He was bitter because it had always been like this; men making trouble for him. They wouldn't let him alone.

His neck muscles stood out as he clenched his few remaining teeth. It hurt him up in the bones of his jaws because his teeth all had abcessed roots and he was afraid to go to a dentist and have them pulled. He felt all the weariness his years had piled upon him.

He saw two men across the room shove their glasses back on their table, get up and saunter out of the saloon. They made a point of walking so that anybody would know they were just sauntering, and it may have just happened that way, but Blackfoot could easily see that their hands were not close to their guns. A little sound came out of Blackfoot's nose which could have been a bitter laugh. Those men were going out to spread the word—and get out of the way of bullets. He turned his wary gaze back to the remaining occupants.

The tension had increased rather than slackened when the customers tried to look unconcerned, and silence still gripped the room. Blackfoot ordered another drink in a weary voice. There was no hope of things ever being different.

Then, as he lifted his glass, his hand halted, poised halfway to his lips. The thump of horses' feet outside—somebody coming in a hurry. Well, this was it. They'd brought the law. He drained his glass and set it on the bar sadly.

But the horsemen had not had time to get dismounted when the loud man at the bar broke the spell of silence. He gulped down a glass of liquor in a hurry, for the sake of his nerves, then took a couple of long steps down toward Blackfoot. The old outlaw almost knew what the man was going to say before he spoke, and when the man did speak, Blackfoot had not been wrong.

"You're the outlaw, Blackfoot," the man barked huskily, "and you've escaped from prison. I recognized you first, and I claim

any reward money there is out for you."

Blackfoot backed the four feet from the bar to the wall. "You must have recognized the hoofbeats of the law," he answered contemptuously. "Otherwise, you might have passed up the reward. Huh?"

"You don't look so bad to me," the man said, and there was still a huskiness in his throat. "Just slide that hand away from that old hoss pistol, grandpappy, and everything will be all right." Whisky courage was talking now.

Blackfoot didn't want to shoot anybody, much less a drunken man. He looked toward the door which opened out the back way, six or eight feet from where he stood with his back to the wall. He started edging along the wall toward it.

The drunk's courage soared at this act, and some of the dust cleared out of his voice.

"I don't want to hurt you, grandpap, but don't take another step or I'll have to stop you."

He had his hand on his gunbutt, but had not drawn the weapon from the holster. Blackfoot's both arms were spread out along the wall, his hands in plain sight. He did not stop his slow progress toward the back door. Then his left hand touched the door and he felt for and grasped the knob.

The drunk had followed around the end of the bar, and now he barked sharply.

"I told you to stop!" He jerked at his weapon.

Only then did the old outlaw's hand go for his own gun. The Colt spat flame before the barrel had got well away from the holster, but before the other man's gun exploded.

Blackfoot's bullet caught the man square in the stomach.

"There's your reward," he said.

THE heavy impact of lead slammed the man down in the sawdust of the floor, where he lost interest in the reward money. He lay holding his middle with both pudgy hands and groaning like a boy who had eaten too many green apples. He was due for a long sick spell.

Blackfoot spared him only a momentary glance then all his old battle-savvy was upon him. He had not forgotten those hoofbeats outside. Now, still watching the rest of the saloon out of the corner of his eye, he turned to face the entrance half-doors. They had already sprung open, and two men had entered.

The two newcomers were here for business, and the younger one of the pair was already in action. He had two guns out as he and his partner separated and came toward Blackfoot.

Blackfoot saw lawman's badges on both of them. He figured the younger man would be faster, and so he shot at his badge first. He didn't miss it an inch.

The younger of the two *was* faster, and he got in a shot from each gun before Blackfoot's bullet spun him around near the still swinging doors.

One of the man's bullets hit Blackfoot.

Blackfoot had already turned the door knob with a hand groping behind him, and the impact of the bullet slammed him against the door. His own weight knocked the door open, and Blackfoot tumbled out into the alley, where he fell into a sea of blackness and pain.

He got up onto his hands and knees and shook his head. His body urged him to lie there and go to sleep, but the long built-up instinct of a hunted animal drove him to his feet.

He felt his way along the back wall of the saloon with his left hand, backing away from the open door, and keeping his gun trained on its square of light. The men in the saloon had sense enough not to stick their heads out of such a frame of light and invite sure death.

Still backing down the alley with his gun trained on the lighted doorway, Blackfoot explored his wound with his left hand. The bullet had entered his left chest, but it seemed to him that it had gone high enough to have been safely clear of the heart area. It might have got his lung, though. The bullet was still somewhere inside him, and there could possibly be enough bleeding to prove fatal.

Blackfoot didn't know, and he didn't care much. He had come here for a peaceful purpose, and if he could only manage to get his one errand done, then it didn't matter what happened after that.

This drunken fellow recognizing him in the saloon was going to make it tough for him to finish his task, but he was going to try it if it killed him.

He backed down a hundred feet to the point where the alley broke out into the

one side street of Amigo. Then he turned and pushed his way through the darkness on shaky legs to a *bois d' arc* thicket where his horse was tied.

The burning pain in his chest was spreading, and he felt his already tired muscles stiffening. He had difficulty in mounting his black horse. There was a ringing in his ears now, but over it he could hear shouts and the uneven clatter of horses' feet back in front of the saloon. A posse was forming.

Blackfoot had foreseen such a situation and prepared for it. He had come into Amigo the previous day, but instead of setting out on his errand immediately, he had ridden out to the outlying hills and spent the whole day locating a hideout and planning any move he might have to make if his identity were discovered.

He sat his horse in the concealing shadows of the thicket, his ears attuned to the sound of the gathering posse, and his mind reviewing the strategy he had planned.

The pain in his chest brought on a coughing spell—and the saliva in his mouth tasted salty. Blood.

That meant that the bullet had touched his lung. He didn't know how bad it was, but it was bad enough. It could be fatal, depending on the internal bleeding. In any event, he had not far to ride. One thing was certain—he could not ride to the hills and fight off a posse, and still have enough strength left to come back and complete his errand. He changed his plan.

He urged his horse deeper into the shadows and watched the posse start out. They rounded the corner of the darkened street, then strung out, over two dozen horsemen of them, and rode right past him—toward the hills where he had picked his hiding place. Blackfoot watched from his concealment until the last figure disappeared in the darkness.

It was luck—or good judgment—that had caused his to alter his plan.

HE RODE back into town, following the posse's backtrail. He had come to see his son and he was going to see him, cost what it might!

But he did not know where the son lived, nor where he might be. He might even be in that posse looking for him. The bartender said that Dick Harper was likely to be in the saloon at any time.

Blackfoot clenched his teeth at the irony of it—and the teeth hurt him. He'd have to risk getting them pulled when this was over.

He had shot two men, and he reasoned that somewhere in town there must be a doctor or undertaker taking care of them instead of being out with the posse. He rode down the street looking for sign.

At the far end of the short street he saw a house with a light in it, and rode up to it. It was a neat white cottage among houses which were not painted, and there were lilac bushes in the yard which gave off a sweet scent as Blackfoot stopped his horse and slid down to the ground outside the front fence. A long time ago he had been married, and his wife had planted lilac bushes.

He unbuckled a tiestrap and took a clean jumper out of his slicker roll, and then he took off his old bloody jumper and put the fresh one on, so there was no sign that he was wounded. Then he went up to the door and knocked.

A white haired old lady wearing glasses came to the door. She had a washpan full of hot water in one hand, and some white towels hooked over the other arm. Blackfoot saw that she was impatient at the knock.

"Ma'am," he asked, "could you tell me where Dick Harper lives? I'd be obliged."

The woman looked at him queerly. "Why, Dick Harper. He's—" She bit her words off quickly, and looked at old Blackfoot again. She did not recognize him, and her training as a doctor's wife in this wild land augmented her natural caution.

"You wanted to know where Dick Harper lives?" she repeated. "His ranch is straight out this road eight miles."

Blackfoot sensed that she had been about to say something else, but he did not have the time to try to find out what it was. It would be much safer to go on out to his son's place and wait for him there than to linger here.

"Thank you very kindly, ma'am," he said, and returned to his horse.

The doctor's wife closed the door, paused a moment to wonder whether she should have tried to learn what the man wanted.

Then she took the water and towels

back into the office where the doctor was busy cutting a bullet out of the deputy sheriff.

Blackfoot's whole body was getting stiff now, and he had trouble getting on his horse. He kept spitting up blood, and he felt weaker.

As he rode on out toward the place where his son lived, there were times when delirium came upon him, and he could not separate his delusions from reality. Part of the time he knew where he was, but part of the time he seemed to be somewhere else, somewhere long ago.

Vistas of his life long ago spread out before him, and he was not sure whether he was reliving them, or whether his mind was wandering, going back to the past like a drowning man is said to do.

Short pictures they were, and disconnected. For a moment he was young again, courting Dick's mother. Then he was on the ranch they had stocked and worked so hard to make a home. Then had come the fight with the big Elmo Wade outfit who wanted his place for the water running through it. Soon a deputy sheriff had found Wade's stuff overbranded with the Harper brand. He hadn't stolen Wade's stuff, but they had railroaded him to prison for that, leaving his wife with little Dick only a month old.

It was a frame-up, and bitterly Harper told them he'd get even . . . Next had come brutality, beatings in prison . . . After he'd served his two years he came back and killed Elmo Wade. But he had not killed him until he had seen the suffering that his false imprisonment had brought on his wife and baby.

They had caught him and sentenced him to prison for life this time. By now his bitterness at the injustice of the law had molded his convictions. He had no intention of spending his life under the lash of guards' whips. He'd been forced to kill the deputy who was taking him to prison, and jump off a moving train to escape, but he did it.

FROM then on he was a hunted man, an outlaw whose hatred of the law and of men whose money gave them power to twist it to their own ends, gave him the energy and the daring to make men fear him. From that day the name of Ezra Harper did not pass his lips, for he did not intend to let his own activities bring any more unhappiness to his wife and boy. Little Dick was a fine youngster.

He sent them money when he could, but it wasn't much. His wife worked and went hungry, and in twelve years she had died, broken-hearted. Young Dick went to work on his own, and old Ezra had not heard of him again.

Harper had always ridden alone, and he had somewhere got to be known as Blackfoot, because he had developed all the wiles of the Indians of that name. For many years now the name of Blackfoot had been a thorn in the sides of lawmen and any big cattle rancher whose record wasn't too clean.

So those years had been spent, some of them in prison, some of them in periods of freedom, but all of them bitter and so unforgiving that men called him a callous killer—which he was not. But he was a scorpion when he was cornered.

The life had taken too much out of him; he had got old and was slowing down, and they finally had got him into prison again. Blackfoot knew that he had not much farther to go and in prison he decided that he was going to see his son once more before he died. He would not tell Dick who he was, but he felt that he must see him. It took him a year to plan and execute his escape, and another six months, while they looked for him, to trace down his son's whereabouts.

And now that he was this close to Dick, he was going to see him before the deputy's bullet in his chest stopped him. After that—he did not care much what happened.

Between spells of delirium he rode through the night and came finally to the little ranch with Dick Harper's name on the mail box nailed to a fence post alongside the road.

The trail from the road to the house crossed a creek, and at the ford he crawled painfully down from his horse, stripped to the waist and attended the wound in his chest. He stopped the seepage of blood, and he felt a little better. The delirium left him.

But he was too stiff to get back onto his horse, so he walked up to the house where a lamp burned in one window, and knocked on the door.

A young boy stuck a yellow, tousled

head out and said, "Hello." He was about ten years old, Blackfoot judged.

Blackfoot took off his hat.

"This where Dick Harper lives?"

"Yes, sir." The boy nodded. "He ain't here, but come in." He opened the door wide.

Blackfoot stepped into a snug room, and at the same time a young woman entered from the kitchen. Her face was pretty and her clothes were neat, and something about her reminded him of the woman he had married a long time ago.

From weakness, Blackfoot leaned against the door. "You Dick Harper's wife, ma'am?"

The woman answered. "Yes, but he's not at home."

Blackfoot apologized. "I'm sorry to come intrudin' like this, but my hoss throwed me up the road a bit, and I thought maybe I could rest here a minute. Expectin' Dick shortly, ma'am?"

The woman's reserve changed to instant sympathy. "Sit down," she said. "I don't know just what time Dick will be here. He's always busy in town on Saturday nights. Can I get you something?"

"I don't want to trouble you, ma'am," Blackfoot answered. "But if that was coffee I smell—"

"Why, of course," the woman answered. "I always fix a lunch for Dick when he gets home. Come on into the kitchen."

"Thank you, ma'am." Blackfoot followed her into the only other room in the house. It was as neat as the living room, and the hominess of it stung him with an old longing.

He hung his hat and gun belt on a nail in the wall beside the stove.

She sat him at a table with a red-checkered cloth and a lamp on it, and served him coffee and biscuits, fried salt meat and eggs. Blackfoot tried to eat, and found that he was so weak that he could not go the food. The coffee seemed to give him a little more strength.

The woman asked. "Were you hurt pretty badly?"

"No'm, the bullet—" he caught himself. "I mean my horse lost his footing—"

"The bullet?" the woman inquired.

"Somebody was huntin' down by the creek," Blackfoot explained. "They shot and I reckon the bullet scared my hoss when it hit a tree right in front of us. I reckon I'll be all right in a little while. Just shook up a bit for a old man."

BLACKFOOT put his hand inside his jumper, and found that the wound had started bleeding again, though the blood did not show through the jumper yet.

He picked up his cup of coffee. "Dick is pretty busy, I reckon?" he inquired.

"Yes, thank goodness," the woman answered. "We've had hard enough luck up to now. But with his new job, we'll make out all right.

"Had hard luck?" Blackfoot asked casually.

The boy was sitting on a wooden bench by the stove, just under Blackfoot's hat and gun hanging on the wall.

"Yep," he said. "We had us a nice little spread started, but that Diamond bunch wanted our land, so they kept stealin' from us. Pop wanted to go and gun down the last one of 'em, but Mom wouldn't let him. Said to do it lawful or not at all. So Pop caught 'em in the act and they was sent up to prison."

"Dickie," his mother protested. "Strangers don't want to hear about our troubles."

Blackfoot managed a grin. "The kid's all right. What you goin' to be when you get grown, son?"

"Me?" the kid answered. "I'm goin' to be a deputy sheriff, like my dad!"

The coffee slushed out of Blackfoot's cup. His hand trembled as he set it down.

"Like what?" he asked weakly.

"Like Pop. Didn't you know they made him a deputy sheriff after he caught them men stealin' our stuff? Said he was the kind of man they needed."

Blackfoot said huskily. "I ain't seen him in quite a while. I hadn't heard about it, but they're right. A man shouldn't take the law in his own hands." He had difficulty saying it.

He leaned both elbows on the table and studied the features of the boy, first with fear, then with a slowly awakening certainty. The boy had the same square chin, the same open countenance and blue eyes as his own son had when he was a baby—and as the deputy sheriff he had shot back in town!

Realization dawned on him slowly, and agonizingly. But there was no way to

avoid facing the truth. The other deputy could not have been Dick Harper. He was much too old.

Yes, Blackfoot had come to see his own son, and had shot him on sight. Dick even now must be lying back in the doctor's house—either wounded or dead!

Blackfoot felt his chest—where Dick's bullet was buried in his own flesh!

Suddenly Blackfoot felt very old and helpless, and he knew that he had ridden his last mile. He had made an awful tangle of his life, and there was not enough of life left him to untangle it.

But there might be one thing he could do, one little thing. . . .

He had a sudden coughing spell—and there was the strong taste of salty blood in his mouth.

And at the same time he heard the sound of galloping horses' hoofs. He knew what that would be—word from town about Dick. It was probable that the messenger might recognize him, either by sight or from his description. He had no time to lose.

He unbuttoned his jumper so it would hang open. The lady saw the large splotch of blood on his shirt.

"Why, you're hurt," she exclaimed, "Why didn't you tell me?"

Blackfoot staggered to his feet, bracing himself with his hands on the table. His whole attitude had suddenly changed.

"Sure, I'm hurt," he snarled. "And it was Dick Harper that done it. Shot me! That's what I'm here for, to get him. And that's probably him ridin' up. No man alive is goin' to shoot Blackfoot and get away with it. Hand me my gun." He acted a little mad.

The startled exclamation, "Blackfoot!" escaped the woman's lips as she shoved her chair back. "The outlaw!"

"Yes, ma'am, and I'd be worth five thousand dollars in rewards, dead or alive. But Dick Harper ain't goin' to live to collect it."

Blackfoot shoved his chair back and turned toward the wall where his gun hung. He was staggering now, and it was half a dozen steps to the weapon. He deliberately fell to the floor.

THE woman screamed and started running toward the front door to warn the approaching horsemen who had stopped in front of the house.

The boy's eyes opened wide for only a moment, then he acted.

As Blackfoot fell, the boy jumped up off the bench and grabbed the outlaw's weapon from its holster on the wall. Now he turned and held it on the old man, lifting the gun in both his small hands.

"Don't you move," he warned. "Just lie still!"

Blackfoot floated into oblivion for a time, and then floated back.

Things were black for a while as he lay on the kitchen floor, and saw Dick's deputy companion now standing over him. There was not much pain now. Blackfoot knew he had only a few moments to live, but that was all right.

He could hear voices in the other room, Dick's and little Dickie's. From what little he could make out, they had brought Dick in and put him to bed, and the boy was talking to him.

"And I caught the outlaw all by myself. He was going to kill you, but I beat him to his gun. We'll have all that reward money, won't we? And we can get some more cattle and start ranching again when you get well?"

There were other men in the kitchen now, but Blackfoot did not open his eyes. He could even make out a few of the words they were saying, speculating on what his name really was.

"We'll never know," one of the voices said. "He won't last an hour."

Well, that was all right. After all, he had seen Dick—over his gunsights—and he was going to die in Dick's house, maybe even in bed. And in his own way, he had fixed things so the law would pay Dick an installment on what it owed the Harpers. His reunion had really been a success.

There was peace in him as consciousness slowly left him.

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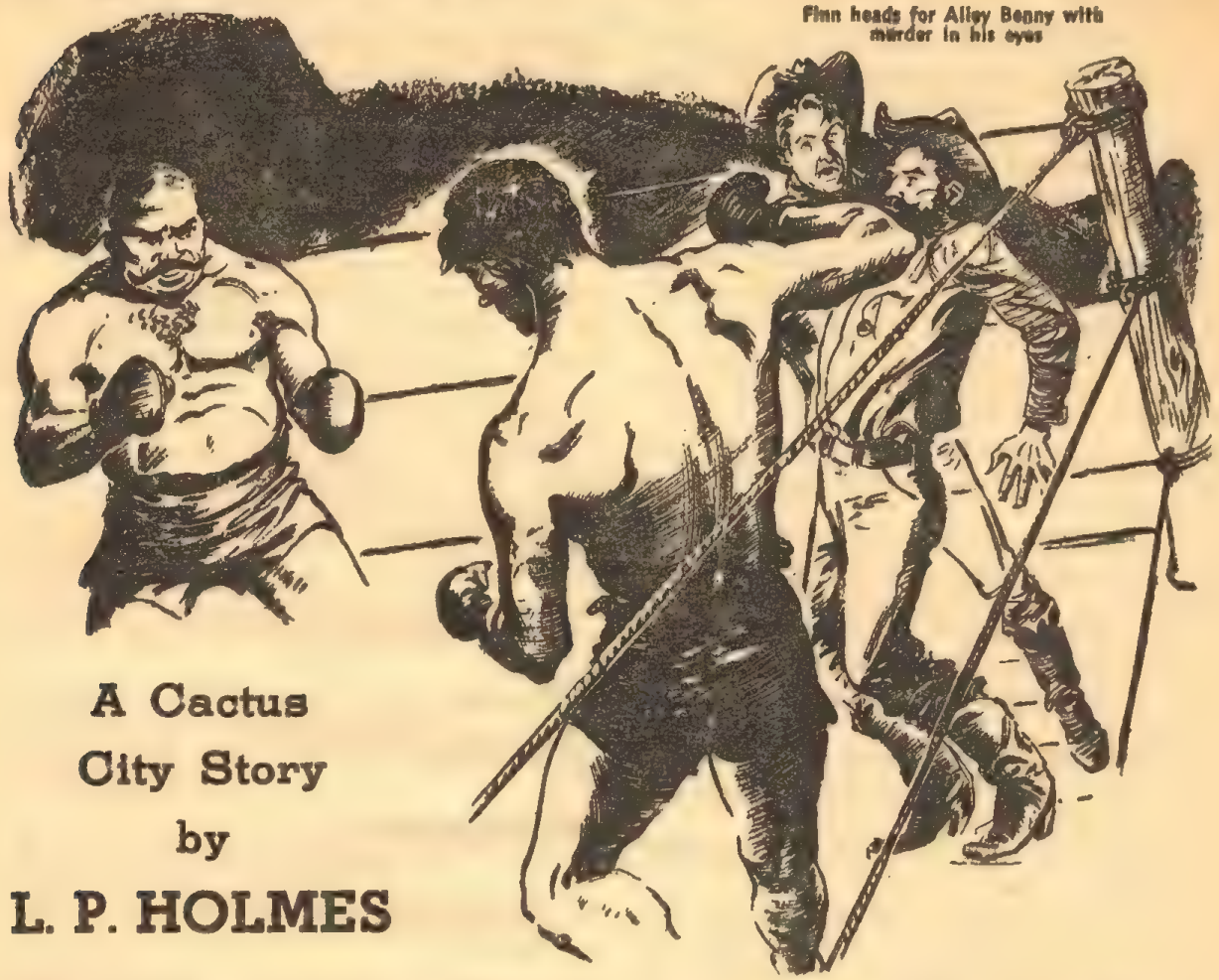
"My Fifty Years in Rodeo," Foghorn Clancy's own true life story, now appearing in RODEO ROMANCES—on sale everywhere, only 15¢ per copy!

# SULTANS OF SWAT


Finn heads for Alley Benny with murder in his eyes

**A Cactus City Story**

**by**

**L. P. HOLMES**

WHEN ONE human critter gets jealous of another, that's bad. But when one town gets jealous of another town, why that, gents, can shake down to a first class war.

There never was any great love lost between Cactus City and Dead Horse Junction. More'n one citizen of Cactus City who dropped over to Dead Horse Junction to do a mite of celebratin' has come home in a pretty frayed out condition. And likewise the same for any bee-head who claimed Dead Horse Junction as his place of domicile and who drug his spurs into Cactus City to give his wolf howl and daub up the night with the well known paint of red.

Now I and Puggy Jimpson and Shoo-fly Davis admit to havin' sat in to a fracas or two with them no good sons of Dead Horse Junction and we found it plumb wearin' on a man's face and state of general well-bein', so for some time we'd stayed plumb apart from that spavined up, mithered down, wall-eyed excuse of a town. Far as I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly is concerned, Dead Horse Junction jest ain't any more an' we don't count on ever honorin' the place with our presence again. Then comes this challenge.

IT HAPPENS like this. I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, havin' just recent helped Bosco Bates, our big, tough sheriff, break

*It's a plumb frolicsome free-for-all when Ike, Puggy and Shoo-Fly tangle in a ring contest between feudin' towns!*

up a feud down in Pleasant Valley between the Hickses and the Jethcoes, and also havin' screened enough Wiggly Crick gravel to fill up all the chuck holes in Cactus City's main street so's to satisfy fat Willie Weehaw's cussed civic pride, we're dodgin' the sun in front of Tug Stevens' Oasis Saloon, when in rides Measely Trotter, one of the first citizens of Dead Horse Junction.

You might almost say that Measely Trotter is the first citizen of Dead Horse Junction, seein' as he owns most of the town as well as bein' Justice of the Peace and Postmaster combined. He's a dried up, shrunk down sort of a bee-head, Measely is, with bat ears, a stingy nose and a long, skinny neck that's sort of wattled so it reminds you of a turkey buzzard. Measely had never been knowed to let go of a dime in his life, once he got his paws on it an' while some said that his wife had died a normal death, there's others who swore the pore lady plumb starved to death on sody crackers an' cold tea, which was the only victuals Measely would allow in the house.

Anyhow, here comes Measely an' he scowls wicked when Shoo-fly ups an' says, "Hi, you ol' buzzard. Let's see you flap yore wings."

"I never," says Measely, kinda whinin' through his nose, "I never bandy words with a lazy, drunken off-spring of a wild jackass. Nor yet with a two-legged cross between a striped backed baboon and a—"

"Whoa—whoa!" cuts in the voice of Bosco Bates. "Draw it fine, Measely, draw it fine. I don't want to see murder done this fine and friendly afternooon and with that kind of talk you're cuttin' yourself a big slice of sudden death. Shoo-fly, you stay put, and mind your language, too."

Bosco comes out of the Oasis while he speaks, and just in time, too, else Shoo-fly woulda lit all spraddled out on Measely Trotter the next second, Shoo-fly ketchin' fire easy when name callin' starts.

"What brings you visitin', Measely?" Bosco wants to know.

"I come bearin' a challenge," says Measely, lofty like.

"A challenge! What kind of a challenge?" asks Bosco.

"A challenge to a test in the manly art of fisticuffs," said Measely. "A test between our champion an' any worthy you Cactus City sports want to select from Cactus City or the range immediately adjacent thereto. A test for a side bet of five hundred dollars, winner take all. I told my friends in Dead Horse Junction that I doubted very much that we'd get action for our money."

Which last remark, gents, gives you a true picture of Measely Trotter. He jest couldn't deliver this here challenge of his without throwin' in a two-bit sneer. If'n Measely figgered that dig to git under our hides, it did, even Bosco's. For Bosco's eyes go kinda cool and he says, crisp like;

"If'n you told 'em that, you plumb misinformed 'em. Who's this champeen of yores you're so proud of?"

Measely Trotter squares back on the ol' flea-bit mule he's ridin' an' sticks out his skinny chest. "Our champeen," he orates, "is Ali Ben Bowser, the Turrible Turk. He has the heart of a lion an' the strength of ten men. With one blow of his fist he can split the top of a table. With two blows he can—"

"Whoa!" cuts in Bosco again. "Take it easy. Where did this Benny Bowser jigger come from? I never heard of him before."

"Me neither," put in Puggy. "What outfit does he chouse cows for?"

"Ali Ben Bowser," says Measely, stiff-like, "is a new citizen of Dead Horse Junction. He just recently bought out Greasy Grimes' hash house and is now servin' the best dang meals to be had in all of Cactus County. Cookin' good grub is jest a side-line with our champeen. Mostly he craves to meet any man of his weight in the squared circle."

"How much does this Benny Bowser weigh?" snaps Bosco.

"One ninety-five, ring side," says Measely. "Put up or shut up. Over in Dead Horse Junction we've had a big overdose of you Cactus City jiggers braggin' an' blowin' about that rodeo you held. Now it's our turn."

There it was, gents. You see what I mean when I mentioned this jealousy bug?

"We'll put up," growls Bosco. "I'll be over to see you in a day or two, Measely. I'll have the money to cover yore lil' side bet, and I'll give you the name of our champeen then, too. Never let it be said that Cactus City was afraid to meet the

best that Dead Horse Junction could offer."

Measely grins mean-like and says, "Thankee, sheriff, thankee kindly. But I shore feel sorry for the pore half-wit who crawls into a ring with Ali Ben Bowser, the Turrible Turk. With one blow of his fist he splits the top of a table. With two blows—"

"Scat!" raps Bosco. "Go tell that Benny Bowser to save them blows. He'll need 'em."

SHE'S a big meetin' that's held that night in the Oasis. Right after Measely Trotter left town, Bosco put I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly to ridin' wide an' fast to spread the word. So now the Oasis is plumb jammed with ranchers an' cowpokes and folks of all kinds.

Bosco Bates, he gits up an' tells all about Measely Trotter an' the challenge Measely brings. "So now," ends Bosco, "what are we gonna do about it? Are we gonna lay down an' let them Dead Horse Junction dead-beats spit in our eye an' make us like it? Or are we gonna git ourselves a champeen who'll whale the everlastin' stuffin' outa this Alley Benny Bowser, the turrible turkey?"

"Le's go get 'em!" whoops Finn Francis. "Ain't never seen no turkey yet I couldn't brush the feathers off'n."

Now Finn Francis, he's a big jasper, runnin' plenty to bone an' meat an' not a half bad man in a free-for-all. And with him speakin' up like this, Bosco looks at him quick-like.

"Thanky, Finn, thanky," Bosco says. "That's the way I like to have you speak up. Fact is, you're jest the man I was hopin' to have as our champeen. Now that you've volunteered to fight for our side, we'll all chip in to meet up with that bet an' I'll ride down to Dead Horse Junction tomorrow to arrange all the details. A big cheer, boys, for our champeen, Finn Francis."

We like to blowed the top off'n the Oasis. Everybody yelled but Finn Francis, who looked around grinnin' kinda foolish like, and sort of anxious, too, as though jest realizin' that he'd bought hisself a fracas with a turrible turkey.

"Hip horray for Kid Francis," squawled Shoo-fly. "Kid Francis, the Furious Finn."

At which Finn Francis reaches over, red faced, an' gives Shoo-fly a cuff. "Shut up, you lil' bee-head. I ain't a Finn an' I ain't Furious. An' I ain't a kid, either. I'm a growed man."

All of which don't do Finn a lick of good. We had to have a name for our champeen jest as good as the one them Dead Horse Junction rannies had for their'n. An' Shoo-fly had supplied it. The crowd took it up, whoopin.'

"Kid Francis, the Furious Finn! That'll throw the fear of snakes into this Alley Benny Bowser, the turrible turkey!"

When things quieted down some, here's Shanty Mike Mulligan, who owns the International Hotel, takin' over. He collars Finn Francis an' says, "Startin' now, you goes into trainin', Finn."

"Trainin'?" gulps Finn. "What kinda trainin' ?"

"Why, road work an' skippin' ropes an' shadder boxin' an' all them sort of things. No drinkin', no smokin'. You gotta eat right an' sleep right."

"Wait a minute," cuts in Finn. "I admit I opened my big mouth an' put my foot in it. Long as I did, I'll go through with it. I'll fight this turrible turkey any old time, any old place. But dang me for a sheep herder if I work on any road, or skip ropes like a school girl, or go around boxin' with shadders. An' I ain't goin' to give up a shot of likker now an' then an' I shore ain't goin' to give up my smokin' .

Even while he orates, Finn starts to spin a cigarette, but here's tough ol' Buck Kyle, who's Finn's boss. Buck growls, "Let that smoke be, Finn. There's a lot more ridin' on this fight than a five hundred dollar bet. Should this turrible turkey knock yore ears back, there'll never be no livin' with that Dead Horse Junction crowd. So you're gonna do exactly what Shanty Mike says. From now on until this fight's over, you don't have to do a lick of ranch work an' yore pay goes on jest the same. But I'll skin you alive if'n you don't train jest the way you're told. That's whatever."

Bosco Bates, who's listenin' in, says, "An' you, Ike—you an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, you're gonna be Finn's trainin' partners. Whatever Shanty Mike tells you to do, why you do it, pronto, or you'll hear from me."

So that, gents, is how it all starts. An'

if you don't think it all didn't shake down into one ding-dong roundelaly, you don't know Cactus City an' the folks who live in it.

ONCE THEY get their teeth into this here managin' business there jest ain't no holdin' Bosco Bates an' Shanty Mike an' Buck Kyle. There's a whoppin' big room out back of the Oasis which used to be a dance hall, back in the days when Cactus City was really wild. Tug Stevens, knowin' durn well that such a set-up would bring a lot of business to his bar out front, offers this room as a trainin' quarters, and Jake Pickle, who's kinda handy with carpenter tools is set to work fixin' things.

Jake sets four posts an' strings rope an' sets up a box fightin' ring in the center of the room. Buck Kyle puts Skeet Mustang up on a relay of three fast broncs an' sends him sky-hootin' clear out to Silverville, from where Skeet brings back a whole passel of gear—boxin' gloves, punchin' bags and such stuff. Buck hisself brings in a sack of sand an' hangs it to a rope tied to a rafter.

"What's that for, boss?" Finn Francis wants to know.

Buck, who's been askin' Shanty Mike about such things, speaks up important-like, "That's the heavy bag."

"Shucks!" pipes up Puggy, "o'course it's heavy. Never see a sack of sand that wasn't heavy. But what's the sense of hangin' her to a rafter?"

"So's Finn can punch it," growled Buck. "Build up his fists an' make 'em tough."

"Huh!" grunts Puggy. "That's what I calls a waste of time. Finn's already got fists as big as hams an' tough as rawhide."

"Mebbe so," snaps Buck. "But we aim to make 'em bigger an' tougher. So's Finn can knock the waddin' outa this turrible turkey."

Well, sir, you never see'd so much shenanigans cooked up gettin' ready for a little bitty ol' fist fight. Most of 'em I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly could stand for. Then Shanty Mike comes out an' says it's time to start road work.

I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly flinch plumb visible at the sound of that word—work. It allus did have a sort of unnervin' effect on us, but we figger that as long as it's meant for Finn Francis, we can stand listenin' to it. Then Bosco Bates gives us the horrible facts.

"You three jiggers," says Bosco, "seein' as how you're Finn's trainin' pardners, gotta go out on the road with him."

Then Shanty Mike explains this road work to us. Out north of town about two miles is a lightnin' blasted cottonwood snag, an' this road work deal is that every mornin' before breakfast, Finn's gotta run plumb out to that snag an' back again. And I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly is supposed to run right along with him.

Right away, when we gits this news, Puggy is all for skippin' the country an' headin' for South Americy for a spell, whilst I an' Shoo-fly is plumb set to agree with him. But we ain't got a chance, not with Bosco Bates breathin' down the backs of our necks, so to speak. So, comes next mornin', here we is, spragglin' out across country like a flock of locoed mules headin' for a clover patch.

If'n you never set out to run four miles in high heeled cow-punch boots, then gents, you got no idee of what real misery is. They've fixed Finn Francis up with some kinda soft, light, rubber soled foot gear, so he ain't bothered much. But I an' Puggy an' Shoofly, bein' jest pardners to the real thing, we don't rate nothin' like that. An' in no time at all I can begin to feel the blisters comin' to life.

Not only blisters on my heels, but by the time I'd waltzed mebbe a quarter of a mile, my breathing apparatus begins goin' bad on me. I can't git enough air nohow an' I begins to wheeze like a wind broke bronc. Puggy ain't doin' a mite better an' Shoo-fly is beginnin' to show signs of blowin' a cork hisself.

But that Finn Francis, doggoned if he don't go lopin' along jest as light and easy. For a big feller, he shore was one runnin' son-of-a-gun. Finn keeps gettin' further an' further ahead, whilst I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly keeps droppin' further an' further behind.

Simultaneous-like, we all three gits the same smart idee at the same time. Which is that Finn Francis would be comin' back along this same trail, so why not wait right here for him? She's a plumb wonderful idee, so we adopts her, pronto! We drops down there in the sage brush, wheezin' an' blowin' an' gaspin' like a

flock of run out coyotes. Jest in time, too. For I'm tellin' you, gents, was I, Ike Ferris, to have run much farther, I'd shore have come all apart at the hinges. Some folks is built for runnin'. I ain't.

PUGGY, he jest lays there, moanin' an cussin' when he can git enough wind back into hisself for the purpose. "Why," sobs pore ol' Puggy, "why can't they leave us three alone? Why does they allus have to heap misery on us?"

"That," snarls Shoo-fly, kinda thin an' peaked like, "that's what I wants to know, m'self. Every time some wall-eyed beehead gits hisself an idee, why it's Shoo-fly Davis, Ike Ferris an' Puggy Jimpson what has to do all the work an' sufferin'. If'n it ain't Bosco Bates, why then it's that pot-wallopin' jug of lard, Willie Weehaw. If'n it ain't either of them two, why then it's Shanty Mike Mulligan or Buck Kyle. This keeps on much longer I'm gonna end up hatin' my feller man somethin' turrible."

"Fundamental," puffs I, "it was Measely Trotter who really comes up with this idee. If'n that danged ol' scaly-back hadda stayed home at Dead Horse Junction an' minded his own cussed business, we wouldn't be wallerin' around in this jug of pain an' heartbreak."

"That's right," nods Shoo-fly, "an' I ain't forgettin' it, not for one lil minute I ain't. Fust real chance I gits, I puts a twist in that particular hair-pin that he won't shuck loose from in nine life-times."

Well, sir, seems like it ain't no time atall before here comes Finn Francis lopin' along the back trail. That feller musta had antelope blood in his veins, the way he covers country. I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, we drags our achin' selves together an' flounders back to town in Finn's dust. Only to find we ain't done for the day. Why, we'd only started.

For there's Shanty Mike Mulligan to strip every cussed stitch of clothes off'n Finn Francis, stretch him out on a bunk an' then put I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly to rubbin' Finn down with slathers of arnica an' alcohol. I can see that Shoo-fly is half tempted to take a swig of that alky, only Shanty Mike is watchin' things with an eagle eye. So I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly we rubs an' pours, pours an' rubs until Tug Stevens' back room smells like a convention of horse doctors.

Finally, when we is jest about rubbed out, we gits a break that keeps us alive a few hours longer. We break off for breakfast an' then a snooze, which don't last half long enough. For then it's Shanty Mike roustin' me up an' tellin' me I gotta git in that danged ring an' do some box fightin' with Finn Francis. Which is bad enough to begin with, without Shanty Mike insistin' that I strip down to my underwear.

Now me, Ike Ferris, I'm a modest man. I don't crave to make no holy show of m'self even in the privacy of Tug Stevens' back room. But I ain't got a chance to argue with Shanty Mike. So there I ends up, prowlin' around in that ring in my underwear, tryin' to keep Finn Francis from sluggin' me bow-legged. I don't have a smidgin of luck. I takes a swipe at Finn, an' misses. Finn takes a swipe at me an' don't miss.

Even though we got our fists laced inside pillows of leather an' horse hair, that don't keep me from feelin' like I'd been kicked by a mule. I lands on the back of my neck an' skids plumb outa the ring. An' I stays out, you can believe me, for about then Ike Ferris is beginnin' to git mad an' I tells Shanty Mike I'll be hung for a sheep-herder before I goes back in there an' lets Finn Francis take another belt at me.

So Shanty Mike picks Puggy for the next victim whilst I wanders off to git my clothes on an' find me a quiet corner an' a jug of corn likker, could such be had. Right in front of me I see one of them there punchin' bag things hung up. She's shaped like a pear an' she's blowed up tight with wind an' hung to a lil' platform gimmick that's upside down. The idee is, you hit her an' she hits this platform an' bounces back so's you can hit 'er again.

Like I say, I'm plumb peckish about now an' when I sees this here punchin' bag hangin' there, fat an' invitin', I hauls off an' hits her a swipe. Gents, nothin' ever hit back faster than that cussed punchin' bag did.

Spang-spang! Jest like that. I hits it an' it hits me, right in the eye. Whango! I cuts loose again an' whango, I git hit right back. I goes kinda berserk then. I really tear into that cussed arrangement. But

I'm a ring-tailed hooty-corn if that punchin' bag don't hit me twice as hard an' twice as often as I hits it.

That finishes me, complete. Ain't nothin' like this here frustration thing to make a man curl up an' quit. An' was I, Ike Ferris, frustrated plumb complete! When a leather an' rubber gimmick full of air can lick me hands down, I knows I got enough. So I finds that corner an' practically cries myself to sleep.

WELL, SIR, things move along. Bosco Bates gits back from Dead Horse Junction with the news that the bet is made and the day set for the fight. She's to take place jest three weeks from now. There'd been a rip-snortin' argument as to jest where the fracas was to take place, in Cactus City or Dead Horse Junction. Finally they dealt a show-down poker hand to decide, an' Bosco loses. So the fight's to be held in Dead Horse Junction.

Excitement begins to boil. Every time Finn Francis does any of this here trainin' there's a crowd on hand to watch an' as the days go by an' she gits closer an' closer to the big showdown, work on all the ranchs around Cactus City comes to a plumb dead halt. Every cowpunch in the country practically lives at Finn Francis' heels.

This fight idee is plumb ketchin', like the wart fever or the hickory heaves. Arguments start easy an' Bosco Bates is plumb run ragged separatin' bee-heads who git to throwin' punches at one another. Them that gits too ambitious, Bosco shoves into the ring with Finn Francis an' Finn takes the fightin' ambition out of them quick.

I an' Puggy in particular is all in favor of such doin's, as that saves us from gittin' punched all outa shape actin' as these here sparrin' pardners for Finn Francis, who is gittin' meaner an' meaner an' punchin' harder an' harder as the days go by. I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, we'd rounded up some ol' Injun moccasins, so when we went out on road work with Finn, we didn't blister ourselves to death no more. It was still an awful long way out to that lightnin'-blasted cottonwood, howsomever, an' it ain't until the fight is less'n a week away that I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, we make it at a run, all the way out an' back, without our breathin' apparatus givin' out complete.

Durned if we didn't feel sorta set up, once we made'r all the way. An' bein' as we jest about lived with Finn Francis day an' night gives us a feelin' of importance. Shoo-fly in particular begins to strut some an' pack his hat pulled low over one eye. Folks begin askin' us, kinda humble-like, about what we thought of Finn Francis' condition, how much he weighed, an' things like that. So before we knowed jest how it happened, we'd entered into the spirit of things plumb up to our necks.

On the sly I begin takin' me a few cracks at that punchin' bag arrangement an' finally got so I could hit the durned thing without it smackin' me in return. One day whilst Finn Francis is sleepin', I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly is foolin' around in these here trainin' quarters, as Shanty Mike calls that back room of the Oasis. In comes fat Willie Weehaw with a order of groceries under one arm an' a sort of sniffy, condescendin' look in his eye. Along with Missis Jake Pickle, Willie is the only citizen of Cactus City who ain't showed some interest in things.

About the time Willie shows up, I'm takin' me a few cuts at the punchin' bag. Willie sniffs right out loud, an says, "Ain't you loafers got anythin' better to do than hang around in here playin' with toys like that?" An' he nods at the punchin' bag.

Quick-like, Shoo-fly answers. "Ain't no toy, Willie. You gotta be a man to hit that bag. You ain't man enough to do it."

"Zat so!" snorts Willie, waddlin' over.

I gits outa the way, an' without settin' down that flock of groceries, Willie winds up with his free arm an' gives the bag a swipe. Bing-bang! Ol' bag hits him back, jest that quick.

Willie looks kinda startled and silly. Again he swipes the bag an' again it swipes him. I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, we laughs right out loud. Willie gits red around the ears an' swats the bag a third time an' gits swatted in return. Willie cusses, drops them groceries an' tears into that bag with both fists goin'. He swings and swipes all out. Mostly he misses the bag complete, but every time he hits it—bing!—he gits hit back.

I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, we ain't enjoyed ourselves so in years an' years. We're laughin' fit to kill an' Willie fair beats the air to a foam, tryin' to murder

that bag. But the bag lasts longer than he does. It's still hangin' there, fat an' invitin' when Willie, bug-eyed and plumb wore down, gathers up his groceries an' slinks out. By that time I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly are rollin' on the floor.

Well, sir, like all things do, the great day finally comes along, an' Cactus City moves down on Dead Horse Junction, where we find they'd built a fightin' ring right out in the middle of the street. Now we bumps into another stand up an' knock down argument. Who was gonna referee this here shin-dig between Kid Francis, the Furious Finn an' Alley Benny Bowser, the Turrible Turkey?

DEAD HORSE JUNCTION wanted one of their citizens whilst we wanted one of ours. Things looked for a while like the whole thing would end up in a general stampede, an all-out gang fight. But finally agreement was struck, as the writin' feller said. Jest to keep things fair an' even it was agreed there'd be two referees, picked by popular choice from each town.

Dead Horse Junction whooped that Measely Trotter would be their man. Soon as that was decided, Shoo-fly turned quick to Bosco Bates an' begged Bosco to make him the Cactus City referee.

"Jest lemme git in the ring with that ol' goat, Bosco," pleads Shoo-fly. "An' should he aim to cheat ag'in us jest one lil bit, then I take him apart like a high wind rolls a tumbleweed."

The idee seems to hit Bosco jest right, for he grins a lil bit an' nods, sayin', "You an' Measely are about the same size an' one's jest about as cantankerous as the other. It'd ought'r shake down pretty even."

So that's the way she was decided. Shoo-fly an' Measely Trotter would referee. For announcer they picked Corn-shuck Calloway, him runnin' a hawg ranch down along Chinkapin Crick an' with a big voice developed from yellin' at them pork critters.

By fight time, that main street of Dead Horse Junction was pack jammed. I an' Puggy, bein' Finn Francis' seconds, we got towels an' water bucket an' all the rest of the gear, plus a half pint of good likker in my hip pocket jest in case Finn needs hisself a good snort should the goin' git rough.

When Finn climbs into the ring, us Cactus City fellers shore let go the long yell. But you shoulda heard the Dead Horse Junction crowd when their man climbs in. They lets out a yowl that like to blew the ring down.

Us Cactus City boys is all cranin' our necks plenty, for this is the fust look we've had at this Alley Benny Bowser, the Turrible Turkey. I got to admit I git a mite afraid for Finn Francis' future health. For this Alley Benny Bowser jigger is plenty big an' swarthy an' tough lookin', with a longhorn mustache decoratin' his upper lip, and muscles bulgin' out all over him like a sackful of snakes. He swells out his chest, puffs out his cheeks an' glares across the ring at Finn Francis like he aimed to eat him alive.

"Stay with him, Finn, stay with him," gulps Puggy. "Make a face back at him. Remember, he's jest a flap-jack cooker by trade an look at the stomach on him. He's got a lot of it an' it looks soft. Hit him a clout there an' I bet he weakens down considerable."

Finn don't seem too worried. "All turkeys puff theirselves out an' strut," he says. "But underneath they're jest turkeys."

Corn-shuck Calloway gits up an' lets out a beller you coulda heard ten miles away. "In the red corner, weighin' one eighty-seven, from Cactus City—Kid Francis, the Furious Finn!"

Man, you shoulda heard us Cactus City boys holler then! Finn, he jest looks around an' grins.

Corn-shuck Calloway waits for things to quiet down some, then lets go again. "In the blue corner, weighin' one ninety-eight, the pride of Dead Hoss Junction—Alley Benny Bowser, the Turrible Turkey!"

That sets the Dead Horse Junction crowd loose an' they like to screech their fool lungs out. Whilst Alley Benny glares around, puffin' hisself up like a conceited toad. I an' Puggy have laced the gloves on Finn by this time an' yonder across the ring a coupla characters named Spivvy Jenks an' White-eye Whitney has done the same for Alley Benny. They're kinda smirkin' as they give I an' Puggy the sneer, like as though they figgered

they're a cinch to win.

So I says to Puggy, "Win, lose or draw, Puggy, I got me an idee to take a coupla swipes at Spivvy Jenks before these here festivities is done with."

Puggy says, "Funny, Ike, but I'm havin' like-wise thoughts about Mister White-eye Whitney. I'll take that smirk off'n his puss."

It ain't over a minute after that but somebody rings a bell an' things take off with a whoop an' a hurroo!

FINN FRANCIS an' Alley Benny bounce up an' meet in the center of the ring. Finn reaches out to shake hands. Alley Benny acts like he intends, to, but instead, all of a sudden he comes around with a terrible swipe an' nails Finn smack on the jaw.

Finn, he turns half over in the air an' lands with a crash like a house fallin' down.

Measely Trotter, he runs over to Finn an' begins swingin' his arm up an' down as fast as he kin, counting twice as fast. "One-two-three-four-five-six-seven—"

Measely gits jest that far when Shoo-fly grabs him. "No you don't!" yells Shoo-fly. "You count 'em right, like this. One ——— tw-oo ——— th-th-three ———"

O'course the Dead Horse Junction crowd is howling crazy with joy right now an' Alley Benny is jumpin' up an' down, flappin' his arms like they was wings, puffin' out his chest an' his cheeks.

I an' Puggy is moanin' low, figgerin' our man, Kid Francis, ain't neither a kid or furious or a Finn, but just a plumb ruined cowpoke, out for a week.

Then Puggy grabs me an' yells, "Lookit, Ike, lookit! Ol' Finn, he's gittin' up—he's gittin' up!"

I can't believe my eyes, but Puggy is right. Finn is gettin' up, sure enough, an' there's a look in his eye that makes me feel plenty good inside. Ol' Finn, he's mad —an' how he's mad!

Shoo-fly an' Measely is still arguin', but Finn jest brushes 'em aside an' heads for Alley Benny, who sudden-like has quit puffin' hisself up an looks like he wished to jump plumb outa the ring. But he can't do that, so, desperate-like, he winds up another swipe an' turns it loose at Finn.

This 'un Finn ducks under, cool as you please an' then hits, fast and wicked. I swear I see Finn's fist sink into Alley Benny's center clear up to the elbow an' Alley Benny lets out the most mortal groan you ever heard. It's worse'n a cow critter goin' down in quicksand. An' down goes Alley Benny, too, in a big, quiverin' pile. This time there can be no mistake—anybody with half an eye can see that Alley Benny is done, that he'll never git out of that ring for a good half hour.

O'course, right away, Shoo-fly is standin' over him, countin'. "One-two-three-four—," most twice as fast as Measely Trotter tried to count over Finn.

Measely don't try an' stop Shoo-fly, knowin' it didn't make no difference whether Shoo-fly counted fast or slow. But Measely is too danged ornery to give in easy. So he starts yellin'.

"Foul—foul! Finn Francis hit below the belt. So the winner, on a foul, is Ali—"

That's jest as far as Measely got when Shoo-fly lit into him, both fists goin'. Then, who should come across the ring to help Measely, but Spivvy Jenks an' White-eye Whitney.

Well, gentlemen, never let it be said that Ike Ferris an' Puggy Jimpson would stand idle while their lil' ol' pal Shoo-fly Davis is jumped on unfair and unsportsmanlike. So we lit right in there asnarlin' an' aclawin' an' the merry-go-round went round.

I know I hits Spivvy Jenks an' I know he hits me. I suspects I hit somebody else an' that they hit back. I know she got thickner an' thicker until there was no sure way of tellin' who was who an' which was which. I go down an' I git up. I git up an' I go down. Things git almost monotonous like. I lose all count of time and space. All I can do is keep on fightin' an' clawin' an' hopin' for the best.

Startin' out, there was just Finn Francis an' Alley Benny an' Shoo-fly an' Measely in the ring. Then there was Spivvy Jenks an' White-eye Whitney. Then there was I an' Puggy. After that I loses all count. But by the feel of boots atramplin' an' fists aswingin', all of Dead Horse Junction an' two thirds of Cactus City piled into that ring an' started chompin' an' clawin'.

O'course a thing like that can't go on

forever. Things finally reach what the poet feller might call the saturation point. There's so many wild eyed bee-heads mixed up in the ring they begin leakin' over the edge an' down into the street. Two of them leaks is I an' Puggy an' we crawl under the ring platform to sort of add up an' subtract.

Puggy's a mess an' by the personal feel of things, I'm another. I got knots an' knobs all over me an' all ambition for any more of the manly art of fisticuffs has plumb run outa me.

"Let's flit," croaks Puggy. "I crave big empty spaces an' peace an' quiet.'

"If'n Shoo-fly was here, I'd go you," groans I.

ABOUT then, off'n the edge of the platform tumbles Shoo-fly an' Measely Trotter. Shoo-fly's still in the land of livin', but Measely is limp as a fresh killed cat. "You scrag him complete?" gulps Puggy.

"Nope," pants Shoo-fly, draggin' Measely over beside us. "But I shore wrung all the water outa him."

"I an' Ike is flittin'," says Puggy. "You comin' along?"

"Soon's I git the bet money," grunts Shoo-fly, turnin' Measely over.

Shore enough, outa Measley's hip pocket, Shoo-fly drags a thick paper envelope, plumb bulgin' an' fat.

"Ha!" gloats Shoo-fly. "Here she is. The hull thousand smackers. Barney Bogash was supposed to hold stakes an' then present it to the winner plumb right an' proper. But jest before the ruckus starts, I see him slip it to Measely an' see Measely pocket it. I could see then that this Dead Horse Junction flock of thieves aimed to win that fight fair an' square if they could, or low an' crooked if they couldn't. Only they didn't. We won her, fair an' square, accordin' to the best Mark of Gooseberry rules.'

"Mark of Gooseberry?" blurts Puggy. "Who in time is he? Never heard of him before."

"He's the guy who writ the rules of box fightin'. Did you bee-heads say somethin' about flittin'? Let's flap our wings!"

She's still a wild tangle all around the ring an' we git tromped up some gettin' clear. But finally we does an' then we really light a shuck, runnin' our broncs half way to Cactus City. Puggy says, kinda thick-like over split lips an' a face all punched sideways, "I got a quart of Tug Stevens' snake juice hid out in the back room of the Oasis. You jiggers interested?"

We is, plenty, an' we got that quart all lapped up by the time other Cactus City citizens begin driftin' home. Everybody who comes in shows some effects of that lively visit to Dead Horse Junction. Even Bosco Bates an' Buck Kyle an' Shanty Mike Mulligan got a sort of frayed look to 'em when they finally show up, along with Finn Francis.

Bosco an' Buck an' Mike is roarin' mad. "The day woulda been a complete success," snarled Bosco, "if'n we could only have collected that bet money which Finn won fair an' square. We tackles Barney Bogash about it an' he swears he give it to Measely Trotter. We finally locate Measely under the ring platform. He ain't what you'd call plumb lucid an' clear minded, but he finally admits he had the money when the fight started, but ain't got no idea where it went to. Some thievin' son-of-a-gun musta run off with it."

Shoo-fly grins. "This it, Bosco?"

Bosco takes a look, then whoops. "Shore is. Where'd you git it, you lil bee-head?"

Shoo-fly tells him when, where, how an' why. Bosco grins an' hugs Shoo-fly. "Durned if I ain't allus over-lookin' yore talents. Well, we gotta put aside about two hundred of it to cover Finn's trainin' expenses. The rest is free money. What'll we do with it?"

"What's free money good for if not for spendin'?" orates Shoo-fly. "Let's celebrate our victory."

Bosco puts it up to the crowd an' got a wolf howl of approval that like to split the walls. There's a combined rush from Tug Stevens' barroom.

"This," exults Shoo-fly, "is gonna be somethin'. But why not? Even Caesar celebrated his victories."

"Caesar?" asks Puggy. "Who's he?"

"He's the big ol' bee-head who fit the Injuns at Bull Run," Shoo-fly informs.

Puggy bats his eyes, then blurts, "What made the ol' bull run?"

But I an' Shoo-fly ain't got time to straighten this 'un out for Puggy. We're too busy scramblin' for places along Tug Stevens' bar.

# GHOST-GUN JUSTICE

## By DANIEL BUNDY

*Old "Hope Eternal" comes to Swiftwater with his Dragoon six, in quest of Tad Tedro!*

HOPE ETERNAL WILKINS

OLD "Hope Eternal" Wilkins' occasional visits to Swiftwater were likely to be memorable events. This time the wizened little prospector had come to town three hours ahead of the giant outlaw some itinerant skypilot had nicknamed "Goliath of the Philistines."

Wilkins had visited all the saloons but one, and had downed enough red-eye to put the average man under the table; and yet his walk was as straight as ever. The sole evidence of his drinking was in his faded blue eyes. They were like wet glass, expressionless. Alcohol did queer things to old Sam Wilkins.

At the last saloon he stood up on the bar rail, leaned across the mahogany and whispered to the bartender:

"Have yuh seen Tad Tedro?"

The noise of the night crowd almost drowned his voice, but the barkeep had heard that question from him off and on for years, and he caught it readily. He glanced at the huge dragoon Colt six-gun that the shrunken old-timer carried under his right hip—and checked a smile. Rumor said that Wilkins knew how to use the ancient weapon.

"Sorry, Hope," the barkeep said, "but I ain't seen Tad. Who is he, anyhow?"

Wilkins stepped down from the bar rail.

"Never mind," he said, "Just pour me another shot of that hooch."

He never mentioned a man named Tad Tedro except when he was drinking, and he had never really answered a question about the mysterious character. He drained his glass, crossed to a table against the wall opposite the bar, and dropped into a chair.

A group of cowboys were standing nearby. "Poor lonesome old coot," one of them said. "Let's buy him a drink."

At their invitation the old desert rat joined them.

"See anythin' of Tad Tedro?" he asked promptly.

Solemnly they shook their heads.

"Wouldn't know him if we did see him," a cowboy answered.

At that instant there came from a saloon squarely across the semi-dark street, the thunder of six-guns and the tinkle of broken glass. Hope Eternal blinked and made profane comment.

"That there Goliath hombre is in town," a puncher told him. "Lookin' fer his David, he said. That shore is one bad, bad hombre."

Again Wilkins blinked. With one finger he scratched a sparsely bearded jowl.

"Goliath—" he muttered. "Big hombre, main big?"

The range rider nodded. "Main big. Size of a hoss. Sheriff Ben Worth's out of town, and this outlaw has got all of the deputies buffaloed. If yuh ain't never seen him—"

Half turning on one heel, the cowboy indicated a reward poster on the inner front wall of the saloon.

On the sheet was a somewhat smudged

picture of a great head and shoulders, full black beard inclined to curling, shaggy black hair upon which a great black Stetson rested at a rakish angle. Hope Eternal walked to a point within a yard of the wall, looked at the poster closely for a moment, turned back to the cowboys.

"That's him. That's him." He was smiling. None of them had ever seen him smile before. "My pardner—"

He broke off as people started to crowd around. The word was spreading:

"Hope Eternal has found Tad Tedro! It's the Goliath hombre, and the Goliath hombre was his pardner!"

An oddly assorted pair, that, certainly. Somebody stepped from the bar with a brimming glass. Wilkins tossed the fiery liquid down his leathery throat without even looking at it. Then he went back to the little table against the wall and sat down.

THE giant black-bearded outlaw walked in a moment later, and he came blustering, as was his way. His great hands were poised, ready to go with speed incredible for the ivory-butted guns that he carried in low-slung holsters.

"Who am I?" The rumbling voice fairly shook the building. "I'm Goliath of the Philistyuns, and I'm lookin' for my David. I'm a double-tailed r-snake, and tonight's my night to rattle!"

There was graveyard silence when he finished. He shrugged, brought a hamlike fist down on the bar so hard the glasses jumped. At his table against the wall, Hope Eternal's eyes were no longer expressionless.

"What'll it be, hombre?" the barkeep asked shakily.

The fierce, dark eyes of Goliath kept snapping back to the long back-bar mirror. Watching the crowd behind him, he was. If he saw Hope Eternal, he gave no sign.

"Business before pleasure, barkeep," he answered. "Why should I muddle up my head with yore hooch? Let's get down to business. How much cash money will yuh pay me not to shoot things up here."

The man behind the bar was no coward, but he spoke hesitantly.

"How much do yuh want?"

"The others paid me two hundred—all but that stingy jasper across the street. He wouldn't—and I bet it'll cost him a thousand to fix his place up the way it used to be. Well, talk fast!"

At his wall table the scrawny old-timer was still smiling.

"I ain't got two hundred," protested the barkeep. "My boss, he emptied the cash draw and went off with the money. Looks like—" The barman paled.

The outlaw had drawn one of his ivory-handled guns. He brought it up to a menacing level. Then, from near the wall, came the wheezy voice of Hope Eternal Wilkins:

"Seen anything of Tad Tedro?"

The hammer of the old Dragoon had come back with a distinct click as the name passed the scraggly-bearded, withered lips. The giant wheeled as though he had been stung. Before he could swing his weapon into line, there came the almost stupendous roar of the huge Colt just above the table edge. The big man's mouth had cracked open. He had found his David.

His gun clattered to the floor. He swayed a moment, then followed it downward. Old-timer Wilkins rose and shoved his Dragoon into holster leather. Without a word he went out to the half-dark street.

His step was weary when he entered Sheriff Ben Worth's office. A lamp was burning on the desk, but nobody was there. The deputies were still making a pretense of trying to capture the outlaw. Wilkins went to the one inner door, opened it, peered down the jail corridor. The door to the nearest cell was open. He stepped inside, felt around until he had located the narrow bed, and stretched himself out on it.

The sun was hours high when Hope Eternal was awakened by the clump of boots and the brisk jingling of spurs in the jail corridor.

A voice spoke in his ear.

"Old-timer?"

He opened his eyes to see foggily the grizzled head and cropped mustache of Sheriff Ben Worth. Wilkins sat up uncertainly.

"See anything of Tad Tedro?" he heard himself mumbling.

"I've seen all I want to see of him, Hope," the lawman said. "We've just finished buryin' him. . . . Yuh got enough reward money comin' to grubstake yuh for

a long time, Hope, and the county owes yuh a heap more'n just money. That Tedro hombre was a holdup man and a killer, and wanted bad everywhere. I reckon mebbe yuh saved the barkeep's life, too. Feel like eatin' somethin' now, mebbe?"

"Say, hold on, Ben," cut in the desert man. "Yuh was mistook in the name. That wasn't Tad Tedro. Tedro was my pardner a good many years back. I always got to thinkin' about poor Tad when I was in my licker, and I'd imagine I might find him, if I'd only look around a little. This old Dragoon Colt was his gun. Now I reckon my pardner can sleep in peace. Yuh see, Ben, that there big hombre killed him just to see him kick."

## TRAIL TALK

*(Continued from page 7)*

pees surrounded by horses, dogs and children.

Most of the emigrants wore tattered buckskin breeches, slouch hats, and woolen shirts, and many of the emigrants wore moccasins similar to those worn by the Indians. Nearly all of them carried knives and revolvers, for each man was a law unto himself, and the way to be understood and to get along best was to be forceful, to be known as one who would not sidestep any trouble that was headed his way.

They were a strange people, those who first went into the wilderness of the West. Many carried with them the refinement they had acquired back in their Eastern homes, and did their best to replant or graft into the population of the new country some of that brand of refinement, while others rapidly dropped the polish of the civilization they had left. The streets of Denver were thick in dust. The wind blew a good deal and this made it hard for people to stay immaculately clean, and some of the citizens forgot cleanliness entirely.

### Wanted—Skinny Men!

They were thin, wiry men. Few men grew fat in that country in those days. Most of them at one time or another scraped the bottom of the barrel. The very nature of the country set a premium on leanness, as was shown by an advertisement that appeared in

[*Turn page*]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Denver's first newspaper, an ad for mail carriers or pony express riders to ride the Indian country which stressed the point: "Wanted—young, skinny, wiry fellows not over 18. Must be expert riders, willing to face death daily, orphans preferred. Wages $25.00 per week. Apply, Central Overland Pony Express."

Twenty-five dollars a week was a whale of a salary in those days, and it was likewise a whale of a job riding pony express. Many times horses would come galloping riderless into a change station, there would be blood upon the saddle, and this blood told the story of another pony express rider who would ride no more, one who had been ambushed by Indians or outlaws, shot from the saddle while the horse ran on riderless.

Old-timers who were in Denver at the time have handed down the story that ninety percent of the early population of men gambled. Men who had been conservative at home succumbed to the wild freedom of the West, and men who had been credited with honesty in the East became known as crooked gamblers in the West.

## Would We Measure Up?

Would we of today measure up to those old-timers? Could we endure their severe lives?

Life was of the simplest. The floors of the dwellings and the stores were of dirt, and there were no glass windows in the cabins in which the people dwelt. Stools and tables were rudely fashioned by the owner, boxes served for cupboards. Most cabins had adobe fireplaces and sod roofs. Food was expensive, since it had to be brought across the plains.

No matter how hard or expensive it was to get food, there was never an insufficient supply of liquor, but good liquor was scarce and very expensive. With the first of the gold seekers, and immediately following them, of course, there came a horde of professional gamblers, gunmen and outlaws, who were content to idle around the town and take life more or less easy while hard-working men and prospectors accumulated wealth enough to have it taken away from them.

A gang known as "the Bummers" banded together to steal openly and insolently. When they helped themselves to the Christmas turkeys brought to town by a rancher, good citizens grew irate and called a public meeting. Resolutions were passed ordering half a dozen of the worst thugs to leave town under penalty of death if they remained. Among them was "Buckskin Bill Karl," who had just previously committed murder.

## Outlaw Defiance

The desperadoes congregated openly at a saloon called the Criterion and derided the friends of law and order. Twice that evening the sheriff was shot at by gunmen. A newly-appointed force called the Rangers was ordered out to patrol the town, but it was easy to see that there would be much bloodshed and the town would lose some of its good citizens along with its bad ones if a pitched battle was engaged in. The town wanted to lose its bad citizens, but good citizens were too scarce, and so the issue was not forced, but the ruffians were again advised to leave town.

A gambler by the name of Charles Harrison ruled and supported the riffraff element of the town. He was a handsome man with dark hair and a fine silky beard. Like most gamblers of that day, he wore the best clothes obtainable. His custom-made boots were always perfectly polished. He was from the South, and had a courteous manner and soft voice. A friendly indolence marked his demeanor. Men called him an honest fighter because he did not kill without warning.

Bat Masterson once said that Harrison was the most brilliant pistol shot he had ever seen and far more deadly than most of the great gun-fighters. While in Denver, Harrison shot three men and hanged one. Once an escaping murderer was galloping at a mad pace down the street and the gambler, Harrison, dropped him from his horse with one bullet from his pistol.

## Harrison Surrenders

There were two factions in the town, one headed by Harrison and the other by the Sheriff, W. H. Middaugh. Shortly after shooting the fleeing murderer, which did not hurt Harrison's reputation with the better element, he killed a patron of the Criterion who was annoying him. The man killed was well known and there were loud threats of vengeance. Middaugh hurried to the saloon and found it closed. He was admitted when he knocked. Present were quite a group of cut-

throats, all heavily armed. They surged about the sheriff threateningly. The two coolest men present were Middaugh and Harrison. The gambler quieted his followers and agreed to surrender if guaranteed protection. At the subsequent trial the jury disagreed. Harrison had arranged that beforehand.

To show that he had no prejudice against informal courts, Harrison hanged a man who had shot one of his friends. He did not trouble to call a people's meeting. The Criterion crowd served as judge, jury, and executioners. Harrison's next victim was a Negro bullwhacker, also a patron of the Criterion.

The entire summer of 1860 was given to violence. At any and all hours the crack of a six-shooter might be heard. To meet the emergency a people's tribunal was formed.

William Young deliberately assassinated Moses West by means of a load of buckshot. He was tried publicly, convicted, and executed next day. A young engineer, James A. Gordon, well-educated, pleasant and agreeable when sober, ran amuck while drunk and started a personal reign of terror. He killed a bartender, Frank O'Neil, then shot twice at another fellow and killed a dog. He shot up the Elephant Corral, a noted early-day saloon, wandered here and there, still carousing and shooting, and finished his jamboree by killing another bartender named John Gantz. The sheriff happened to be out of town at the time.

## Killer Steele

The Rocky Mountain News came out with a blast against the wave of murders, naming especially the crimes of Gordon and the killing of the Negro by Harrison. Three desperadoes abducted the editor, whose name was Byers, from the News office and hustled him down to the Criterion saloon. Two of the three were guilty of murders in Denver. The third man of the abducting party was George Steele, who had already been ordered several times to leave the country.

The gambler and leader of the lawless faction, Harrison, had an instinct which told him when his men were going too far. He slipped the editor out of a side door and saw that he got safely back to his office. However, Steele was not satisfied. On horse-

[*Turn page*]


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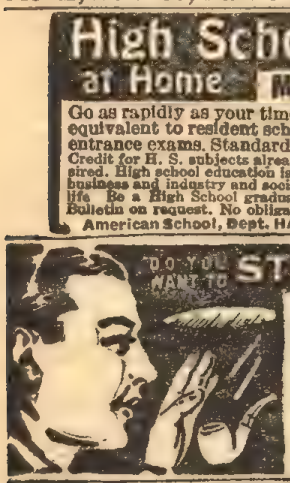

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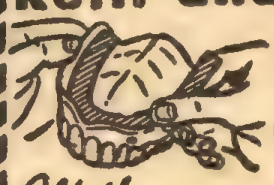

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back he returned to the News office and fired several shots at those inside. Byers and his men returned the fire and wounded the badman. As Steele gave up the fight and rode away, two citizens jumped upon their ponies and pursued. One of them, Tom Pollock, caught up with Steele and filled the outlaw full of lead.

In the meantime Sheriff Middaugh traced and caught up with the engineer Gordon, following him all the way from Denver to the Indian Territory. The sheriff arrived in Leavenworth on his way back with his prisoner, and there a group of men tried to lynch the killer, and Middaugh fought them off. He and two assistants had their clothes practically torn from them, and several times in the fight a rope was thrown over the killer's head and around his neck—but each time, the sheriff managed to get the rope off before the men could tighten the noose.

There was a great deal of talk among "the Bummers" about rescuing Gordon when he was returned to Denver, and one of the gang challenged the editor, Byers, to a duel for advocating the apprehension of Gordon. The editor refused to be drawn into the kind of fight he knew the duel would be. Gordon was tried and found guilty by the people's court and the young fellow asked that Sheriff Middaugh have charge of the hanging.

### The Law Triumphs

After the people's court had hanged half a dozen men in what might be called rapid order, the law and order element began to grow stronger and the lawless element weaker. This was because honest men who had been afraid to speak up previously, now allied themselves with the lawmen. Thus the timid, decent citizens, became bolder in a righteous cause, and as there is and has always been strength in numbers, they were able to outnumber the outlaws and gradually began to get the better of the cutthroats.

But Sheriff Middaugh did not get to live to see Denver won over to law and order. He was shot from ambush near Julesburg, Colorado. His assassin was never known, but the general opinion was that the deed was done by one or another of the outlaws the sheriff had run out of Denver.

Many good men lost their lives in bringing law to the West. Many of those brave pioneers never tasted the fortune that they

sought, but laid down their lives in the cause of decency. They did not die in vain, for often it was the death of such men at the hands of cowardly assassins that caused decent people to rise up and throw their strength with the element striving for justice, and that is why we have today a West that we can be proud of, where we can live in peace and prosperity.

We owe much to the good element among the pioneers of the West. We feel such a reverence for those true pioneers that we do not generally call the early-day outlaws of the West "pioneers." While the badmen were pioneers in a sense, we do not want to honor them by that name which is reserved for the honest and brave men who gave us such a great heritage. They were just "outlaws."

Well, we have taken quite a jaunt, so I guess we had better turn the horses back in the corral for the present, but we hope that you will be with us when next we ride those old trails of romance and adventure. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

## OUR NEXT ISSUE

THE Old West was traditionally a place of friendliness and generosity, of tolerance and understanding. But, because it was wide and free and devil-may-care and rich, it was a land that drew crooks and marauders and night riders as a magnet draws iron. There was rich loot to be had in those far-flung, cattle-crowded areas for men who had the wit and the daring to take it—and that meant, of course, that men of equal brain and courage would gird themselves to fight the marauders, on their own terms or any terms.

The result was man against man, no holds barred—and in the Old West, with its roistering, brawling, gun-totin' rannies, there erupted some of the primest ruckuses this old world has ever seen. The six-gun is not—and never was—a respecter of persons. It knows one rule—the finger on the trigger, the thumb on the hammer—and its heavy, hurtling slug will send a good man to boothill with the same speed it sends a bad one!

Among the guns that spoke with savage emphasis for justice and decency in the early West were the legendary six-shooters of The Masked Rider. A fiction character,

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The Masked Rider—Wayne Morgan, roving cowboy, under the mask—has galloped and gunned his way across many a thrilling page. But seldom has this man—tall in the saddle and terrible to his enemies—gigged his big black stallion, Midnight, through a more absorbing adventure than is his in RETRIBUTION RANGE, comin' up in the next issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN. The story is by Gunnison Steele, and it's a rousing tale of hot lead and cold nerve.

There is, for instance, a young fellow named Dan in the story—never mind his last name, that would be telling—and Dan, going somewhere in one heck of a hurry, meets a gent of your acquaintance. Like this—

Dan sent the roan clattering and clawing up a rocky incline and into the cut, lips peeled back from his teeth in a grimace of wicked anger as he flung a glance back over his shoulder. His pursuers, led by Ben Dura, had already burst from the timber.

Dan wheeled back—just in time to see a lone rider spur out from a niche in one of the walls and into the narrow passage before him. The rider, mounted on a roan even bigger than Dan's own, was tall, powerful, with rugged bronzed features and wide lips. He was dressed in levis, gray shirt, and battered brown Stetson. Twin black Colts encircled his lean waist.

The newcomer, Dan saw, was deliberately blocking his escape route. His hand was upraised in a signal for Dan to halt.

Dan yelled furiously, "Get outa my way, brush-popper, or I'll blow yuh apart!"

He drove his mount headlong at the other rider, spurring savagely. The tall, blue-eyed rider, he saw instantly, had no intention of budging. No more than twenty feet separated them now, with the hammering hoofs of his


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mount closing the distance with incredible speed.

Dan shouted, "Blast yuh, didn't yuh hear me?" and grabbed for his gun.

But now the stranger's big roan, which had been standing rock-still, suddenly shot forward as if catapulted. The two big animals came together with a smashing jar that echoed in the narrow passage.

But, an instant before the collision, the big cowboy had left his saddle in a lunging, headlong dive. One hand slashed for Dan's hand, already gun-filled and rising, and clamped his wrist in a steel-like grip. His shoulder mauled into Dan's chest, driving him violently backwards from the saddle.

They slammed against the rock wall, caromed off it and thudded to the hard earth. They rolled about on the ground, a tangled mass of arms and legs, mauling, clawing and gouging like a couple of wildcats. The scar-faced man fought savagely, trying to break loose from his antagonist, knowing the posse was almost upon them.

When he did fight loose and scramble groggily to his feet, a mauling fist came out of nowhere and smashed him to the ground again. The twin-gunned, blue-eyed cowboy grabbed him by the collar and hauled him to his feet, just as the dozen riders, led by Dura and Sheriff Jacks, thundered into the cut and dragged their horses to a halt a few yards away.

The tall cowboy looked calmly at them, at the guns in their hands. "You gents after this busky?" he drawled.

"We sure as tunket are, cowboy," the big lawman growled. "And likely he'd have made a clean getaway if you hadn't stopped him. Who're you?"

"Name of Wayne Morgan. I heard some shots, then saw this jigger come hellin' out of the timber with you fellers after him, so I figured he must be some kind of criminal."

"You figgered right. Easy there, Ben."

Ben Dura had swung from saddle, stepped in close and slammed his fist into the prisoner's face. Dan, still dazed from his fight with Morgan, reeled backward, cursing furiously.

Morgan had been too late to stop Dura, but now he whirled and his arm straightened like a ramrod, the heel of his hand catching Dura viciously under the chin. The Anvil foreman sat down abruptly, but came up swearing, and grabbed for his gun.

He found himself looking into the black muzzles of twin guns in Wayne Morgan's steady hands, and he froze motionless.

"Hombre," Morgan purred, "that's one way graveyards get started. And nobody but a cowardly snake would hit a man when he's bein' held!"

Now that, boys and girls, sure puts Wayne Morgan into a mighty interestin' situation, wouldn't yuh say? Because we'll tell you this much—this Dan hombre wasn't what Morgan had first figgered him to be—but Ben Dura was, and how! Morgan had sized

[*Turn page*]

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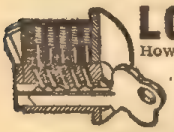

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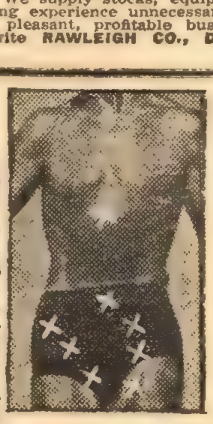

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*him* up from that incident—mean, revengeful, dangerous—a man to be watched every second.

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When you have finished next issue's featured novel, you'll still have a half a bookful of real readin' entertainment! There's the novelet by Johnston McCulley, titled INJUN HATE. This is a rousing story of the U. S. cavalry against the redman, with Cheyenne Jim Carroll, citizen scout, getting off to a bad start by clashing with the young West Pointer, Lieutenant Richard Blaney.

"You can throw around a lot of authority with them shoulder straps on," Cheyenne Jim sneered. "I ain't a yellowleg to be bossed by you. I'd be willin' to spend more days in jail for smashin' your pretty face. But it'd be a pity and a shame to pick on a little boy."

"So?" Blaney's eyes were blazing now. "Carroll, we were taught a lot of things at the Point. Among them boxing, and keeping our tempers in a situation like this. But I'm willing to do one thing. I'll take off my blouse, Carroll, and we'll step out back and have it out, man to man. No rank on me, Carroll, and nothing but my fists to prove that maybe I'm not the raw boy you seem to think me."

Want a ringside seat for that fight? It's yours for no more trouble than opening the next issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN and turning to the story, INJUN HATE.

Other stories, too, of course, same as always, and the departments and features for good measure. Quantity—*and* quality!

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Florida to Fairbanks, and in between. Time out while we see what's here. . . .

Okay, have a look, all of you!

I have been reading western magazaines for a long time, but I enjoy MASKED RIDER WESTERN best of all. I think Wayne Morgan should stay single. Please keep up the good work.—*Cora Pearl Foreman, Paulding, Ohio.*

I have been reading MASKED RIDER WESTERN for just about as long as I can remember. I think it is the best magazine on sale, and I should know as I read them all. I have just finished THE PHAMTOM FORTY-NINER, and I liked the idea of Blue Hawk using the bow and arrow instead of his carbine. Let him keep the bow and arrow. It seems more original for a redskin to carry them.—*Pvt. Myrlon D. Settle, Fairfield—Suisun A. A. B., Fairfield, California.*

My hobby is reading and collecting cowboy yarns. I find your magazine very exciting and thrilling.—*A. H. Almond, Liverpool, England.*

MASKED RIDER WESTERN is a fine magazine, but how about some more stories by Lee E. Wells, Charles Hecklemann, Donald Bayne Hobart and Larry Harris?—*Leslie Wilson, Philadelphia, Pa.*

As soon as I finish reading one issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN, I begin waiting impatiently for the next. I wish they could come out more often, for I sure do enjoy reading about Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk. Those two are tops.—*Carter Creswell, Miami, Florida.*

I have been reading your magazine for years, and I like the Masked Rider stories, and the other yarns in the book. But I always wonder what is the matter with the many people the Masked Rider meets. At least some of them ought to recognize him as Wayne Morgan!—*Roger Canaday, Winnipeg, Canada.*

Sorry, hombres and hombresses, but that's all for this time. We wish we could print every one of your swell letters and cards—but you may be sure every communication we get is carefully read and studied. We'd be mighty glad to hear from more of you. Kindly address The Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Best of everything, folks, and thanks to all.

—THE EDITOR.

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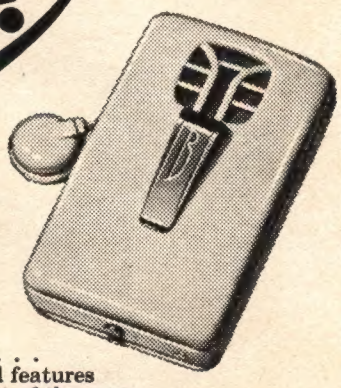

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